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BY

BARONESS B. DE BURY



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WARD, LOCK AND CO.,
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ALL FOR GREED.

A Novel.

BY

BARONESS B. DE BURY,

AUTHOR OF

“LOVE THE AVENGER.”

NEW EDITION.

WARD, LOCK AND CO.,

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ALL FOR GREED.

CHAPTER I.

A VERY SMALL TOWN.

IN the whole west of France there is no prettier town than D——. Lying rather out of the way, it has as yet had but few pretexts for “improving” itself, and in many respects presents the same appearance as it did some half a century ago. D—— is nothing in particular; not a fishing town, for the sea is too far off; nor a manufacturing town, for “business” of that kind is absorbed by Chôlet, which is some ten leagues distant, and represents the manufacturing interest. D—— is, if anything, an occasional place of passage or rest for drovers, who still find it quickest and cheapest to drive their Chôletaïs oxen from the banks of the Lèvres to the more central towns on the banks of the Loire, pending the establish-

ment of small local railway branches. No railroad leads to D—. If it did, old Martin Prévost would not have been the great ruler of that small town that he truly was.

Martin Prévost was of Swiss extraction. His grandfather had been valet de chambre, steward, factotum, alter ego, to a famous Vendéan chief,—a proud rich noble of the ancient régime, but one of the few who preferred the hard active life of a partisan to anything Court favour could offer him, and who was genuinely glad to exchange Versailles for the hazards and hardships of La Chouannerie. The trading principle being uppermost in the mind of the Helvetian, the confidant of Monsieur le Marquis soon became rich. It was said that he managed to sell a good many of the necessaries of existence to both sides at once, and that both were his grateful customers. He was never known to betray either, but merely got out of each all he could. Monsieur le Marquis died in exile, earning starvation wages by the French lessons he gave in an English seaport town, and his valet de chambre died possessed of a house in D—, in which he had, at the time of the Consulate, opened what Americans would call a “store.” His principle was one of beautiful simplicity. He bought everything

and sold everything ; striving only with delightful single-mindedness never to realise any profit under twenty per cent. upon either operation. He married a wife who was crooked and blind of one eye, but these slight defects were fully compensated for to him by the dower she brought him, and which he laid out so as to double it,—of which fact she never had the smallest token or proof.

His son was unworthy of his sire, and did nothing to improve his position in life. The father judged his offspring severely, but took care to get him advantageously married, and when he died, recommended him to the care of his wife.

Prévost II. went through life and out of it, unnoticed ; but did not dissipate his estate, so that, at his death, in 1835, he left what his father had left him, and what his wife's dot had added to that, untouched and entire to his two sons.

In Martin Prévost, the younger of these two sons, the spirit of the grandfather burned strongly, and was intensified by that atmosphere of barter which in France above all countries, is the very “over-soul” of mankind in this nineteenth century. Martin Prévost carried the destinies of his house to a remarkable height, and at the time of which we are writing he was virtually the

ruler of D—— and its population of 3,800 souls.

Martin Prévost was the money-lender of the whole district, and as those who borrowed rarely paid in cash, and as he never lent save on unexceptional security, it is not difficult to calculate how from decade to decade Martin's power and wealth increased. Soon after his father's death he bought a Charge de Notaire, which he kept for six or seven years, and then sold to considerable advantage; for he had gained for this office such repute that people of high standing came to consult him, from distant towns even, and his opinion and advice were worth gold! When Monsieur Martin Prévost sold his Etude he called this proceeding retiring from business. "Je me retire des affaires," said he; but there were one or two sharp-eyed individuals, and D—— numbered marvellously few such, who opined that on the contrary this was the very period when Prévost's business seriously began. By the time he had been six or seven years a notary, no family within twenty or thirty miles had a secret of which he was unpossessed; and when he delivered over the various and voluminous documents of his office to his unsuspecting successor, he carried away in his prodigious memory the details of the financial complications of the entire neighbour-

hood. But old Prévost was a wise man, and though his power was felt and acknowledged, he never allowed it to be supposed that he ever could possibly presume upon it. He lived well, but modestly and economically, having but one servant, a woman for whom he had the deepest respect, and as outdoor servant, a man who was gardener, labourer, groom, and commissionnaire to Madame Jean.

It used to be said in and about D—— that no one knew anything that was not good, and that no one felt anything that was, touching Martin Prévost; yet every one applied to him, and every one, at some moment or other of their lives, trusted him. He had never married, but he had adopted his nephew, and given the young fellow an excellent education. Old Martin's brother had turned out ill,—that is, unlucky,—and had died young in America, whither he had emigrated, terribly in debt. What became of his wife, or who or what she was, no one in D—— ever heard. Some people said she had run away from him; but Martin had the boy sent to him, when he was only six years old, had brought him up since then, and, I repeat it, had brought him up well. What created no little astonishment was, that he had not brought him up over strictly, but in the

way of liberty and money gave him to the full as much as other young men of his station could boast of possessing.

Wednesday was market day in D——, and on a certain Wednesday, not quite two years ago, a little group of two or three women was gathered round the open door of Martin Prévost's house talking with Madame Jean. There was the same character of sharpness in each of those female faces, but Madame Jean had an air of authority which the others lacked, and the basket she carried on her strong stout arm was half as big and half as full again as any of the other women's baskets. It was not much past eight o'clock, and though the October sun was warm, the air was still cool, and a fresh but not unpleasant wind shook the boughs of the lime-trees overhanging the terrace of old Prévost's garden.

"Certainly poultry is out of all price," cried bitterly a skinny, black-browed woman, looking enviously at Madame Jean, and at a pair of huge Cochin-Chinese legs that protruded from her basket. "We up at the Mairie haven't gone out of beef and vegetables for I don't know how long;—and beef, up now at thirteen sous, one franc six a kilo, as they will call it;—well! I reckon by pounds and sous, I can't take to their new ways, though I do belong to the

Administration." At this the speaker drew herself up with pride.

"Yes," said Madame Jean, "beef is dear, and veal is bad,—all strings;—and poultry is dear, and everything is dear."

"But nothing is too dear for la maison Prévost," interrupted the purveyor of Monsieur le Maire. "Mère Jubine well knows where she can place a fowl even for the sum of three francs ten,—four francs even, who can tell?"

"Mère Jubine owed it me!" replied, with dictatorial tone, Madame Jean. "The last I bought from her was an unsatisfactory fowl, so I reckoned it her at only half price, and took this one to make up. Our young man is not well just now, and wants light food, so I shall let him eat poultry for a few days. Bless my soul! it ain't such an extra after all. With two pots au feu there's the whole week; reckon:—all depends on the management, no extras are any matter if you are a ménagère, and if you are not, why you come to think bread itself an extra; but where are the ménagères?" Madame Jean said this defiantly, and the other matrons were cowed.

"Is anything serious the matter with Monsieur Richard?" asked the mildest looking of the group in a propitiatory manner.

"Serious? No!" responded Madame Jean, as though it would have been absurd to suppose that anything serious could be the matter in so prosperous a house as that of Monsieur Prévost. "Serious? No! but you know he never was the strongest of the strong; he's not a Turk nor a weight-thrower at the fair, and he's never quite got over his attack of the lungs this winter; he's delicate, if you will, but care makes up for everything, and he gets lots of it."

"Why didn't you buy that hare of Mère Lucas?" whined out the chief of the mayor's kitchen. "I've heard say game was good for invalids."

"Because I didn't choose," retorted Madame Jean sharply.

"Oh!" was the rejoinder. "Faites excuse. I thought it might be because of something else," and the woman looked warlike. But war with Madame Jean was not a thing to be dreamt of, as she quickly showed. Turning sharply round, and resting the whole of her outspread hand upon one end of her big basket, which drove the other end of that well-filled recipient so far up behind her shoulder that the Cochin-Chinese legs seemed almost sprouting from her back like cherubs' wings—"Madelon," said she, "you mean Prosper Morel. I know quite well what

you mean; but we know all about it as well as you do, and we don't want Monsieur le Maire or anybody else to inform us of anything. I had my thoughts about that hare, if you must know; that hare never was shot,—that hare was caught, caught mayhap on Monsieur Rivière's land, therefore stolen. There; call it by its name, stolen; a deal more likely stolen by Prosper Morel than by any one else; but what then? primo, where's the proof? You believe it; the Maire believes it; the garde's certain sure of it; but more than all, I believe it; but what then? Prosper has had his permit taken from him; Monsieur wouldn't help him to get it; and what then? Suppose the garde catches him, and draws up his procès-verbal, and he gets condemned and fined, and justice is satisfied, and suppose Monsieur turns him out of his hut up there in the forest, and gets another woodcutter. Well, suppose all that, what then? Who'll be shot in a by-path, or have his throat cut in his back shop, or have his house burnt over his head?" The women all looked aghast and nodded their heads ominously, as though admitting that it was but too true.

"You fancy, do you," continued Madame Jean, "that that silent, sulky, hulking Breton would let the worst come to the worst

without having his revenge. But all the same, Madelon : don't you imagine we don't know as well as Monsieur le Maire what goes on in D—— ; only I don't buy trapped game. Monsieur Richard's chasse suffices us. We are regular people, and eat the hares and partridges off our own stubble. If Mère Lucas makes one franc fifty clear profit out of a hare, she pays fifty centimes, taking the risk. She's welcome to it, but I don't put the one franc fifty into her pocket, not I!"

"Monsieur le Curé's Lise does," observed the mild-mannered woman.

"Oh ! Monsieur le Curé's Lise !" snarled Madelon in her most contemptuous tone, and as though no proceeding could possibly be too objectionable for Monsieur le Curé's Lise.

"Well ! Monsieur le Curé's Lise ?" retorted Madame Jean. "She's a wise woman ; she gets for two francs a hare worth four, not to say five, if we were in carnival time, and no harm done. Monsieur le Curé may do what he likes."

"There she goes across the street," remarked Madelon.

"And Céleste from down at Vérancour's, with her," added her soft spoken companion.

A laugh, indulged in together, by

Madame Jean and Madelon, seemed to establish peace between them.

"It would be a fine sight to see what she has bought at market," sneered Madelon; "two potatoes, three olives, and an onion, maybe! They do say that on fast days Céleste serves up fish a week old!"

"Fish!" echoed Madame Jean; "fish out of sea or river comes a deal too dear for the Château!" She laid a tremendously pompous accent on the first syllable. "I was once inside their doors, and in going away I had just to cross the dining-room as they were coming in to dinner. If you'll believe me, there was, besides a soup of bread and water, nothing but lentils and a red herring. But, Lord! weren't they set out in fine silver dishes! It was the Wednesday of the *quatre-temps de Septembre*. I've wondered to myself ever since then what it is they live upon; for the wind that blows, however healthy it may be, won't keep body and soul together in three grown-up people."

"Live upon?" exclaimed almost savagely Madelon. "Why, upon their own importance!"

"To be sure," remarked the conciliatory one of the group, "they do believe in themselves!"

"Yes," muttered Madame Jean, "to

make up for nobody else's believing in them."

"Never mind," added Madelon, "let's see what Céleste has got in the way of flesh for these grandes, for it's not the quatre-temps de Septembre now, and they must put something more than vanity into their stomachs, all the same. Cé——"

"Hush!" said Madame Jean, stopping the loud appeal which the other woman was preparing to address to the two bonnes who were at the further side of the street. "Hush! There's Monsieur le Vicomte himself turning the corner down to the left, and coming this way."

"Ugh!" grunted Madelon. "What's he wanting up hereabouts? I thought his daily mass was hardly over by this time."

"He's coming here," said Madame Jean; and a moment later the person alluded to came up from behind, divided the group of women, touching his hat as he passed, and saying "Pardon, mesdames!" confronted Madame Jean on the doorsteps on which she was standing. The women nodded to each other and parted, leaving Madame Jean alone on the threshold of the maison Prévost.

"Could I see Monsieur Prévost for a moment?" inquired the new comer, politely.

"Quite impossible at this hour," rejoined Madame Jean after a most stately fashion.

"Monsieur has not yet breakfasted. It is not yet nine. Monsieur breakfasts as the clock strikes ten, and Monsieur never sees any one before breakfast. You have not come by appointment?" she asked.

"No—not exactly—but——"

"Of course not," interrupted Madame Jean. "Monsieur would have informed me."

"But my business is very pressing," urged the petitioner, "and would not take up more than a quarter of an hour."

But it was no use. Madame Jean was "in the exercise of her functions," and any one who has ever had dealings with them, knows in that particular state how unmanageable is a Frenchman or a Frenchwoman. Madame Jean was not impolite; she was impervious, opaque, not to be penetrated by an influence from without. He who strove to propitiate her, had to bear his ill-success complacently,—for fear of worse,—and accept her permission to come again at eleven o'clock. She had the satisfaction of making things go her own way without any extraordinary effort; and though it could not be objected that she was rude, she contrived never once to address her interlocutor as "Monsieur le Vicomte."

CHAPTER II.

THE MARRIAGE PORTION.

MADAME JEAN had barely witnessed the retreat of her enemy, for such it appeared he was, however innocently, when she became aware that her master was calling her from within. She shut the house-door, and, putting down her basket in the passage, went up-stairs to a room on the first-floor, whence the voice issued. Opening a door to the right, she stood in Monsieur Prévost's presence.

He was standing close to a large table covered with account books and papers, and he held an open letter in his hand.

Martin Prévost was about sixty-two or three, and though he looked strong and bien conservé, still he looked his age. He was above the middle height, gaunt rather than spare, with a bony frame, an immense hook-nose, and two small, sharp eyes, quite close together. There were about him all the signs of power of an

inferior order; power of plodding, power of endurance, and capacity of privation, and the unfailing marks of acquisitiveness,—the rapacious eye and hand. “Look at that,” he said, in an angry tone, as he thrust into Madame Jean’s fingers the open letter he held in his own; “the fellow has just been here, and I have told him that if he can’t clear himself of these accusations he must go. I wash my hands of him. I’ll have no quarrels with the Administration. He shall be turned out.”

Meanwhile Madame Jean read the letter, which ran thus:—

“SIR AND HONOURED COLLEAGUE” (Monsieur Prévost had been the mayor of D—three years before, and the present man was his successor),—“I think it right to warn you of the irregularities of the man named Prosper Morel, in your employ. As you are aware, he has no *permis de chasse* this season, but I have every reason to believe he steals game in the night-time. The garde, François Lejeune, is morally convinced of having seen this individual committing his malpractices, though he has hitherto contrived to escape being taken in flagrante delicto; and Monsieur Rivière has already twice complained of him to me officially. As the man is employed by

you, and as nothing would give me greater pain, sir and honoured colleague, than to have to take any steps annoying to you. I venture to beg that you will admonish him and force him to renounce his malpractices, in default of which I should be obliged to proceed with a rigour I should deeply deplore, and set the gendarmerie in action.

“I remain, &c.,

“SIMON COLLOT, *Mayor.*”

When Madame Jean reached the word gendarmerie, she for certain excellent reasons which we shall know later, curled her lip in disdain, and muttered something unintelligible, but which seemed to imply that she knew better than to indulge in the slightest alarm respecting the gallant body of defenders of the state.

“Now look you here, Sophie,” said Monsieur Prévost, when his prime-minister had concluded her perusal of the administrative appeal, “my mind is made up. Prosper Morel goes about his business at the end of the month. I’ll have nobody of his kind about me; it compromises one’s position. It’s intolerable; he shall leave at the end of the month.”

Madame Jean shook her head. “He’s been here sixteen years,” objected she.

"What does that matter?" retorted her master.

"His wife was the little one's bonne."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"No;—I know it hasn't," observed the woman, "nothing at all;—only she saved his life when he had the typhus fever, and lost her own by catching it."

"What the devil has that in common with her husband?" growled Martin Prévost. "The woman's dead."

"Yes; but how is the man to gain his bread if he leaves here?" persisted Madame Jean. "He's at home a long way off, down in Basse Bretagne, and he's got no home at all when he gets there."

"He must beg," replied Martin Prévost.

"Begging's forbidden by law," answered Madame Jean. "He must steal or he must starve."

"Well, he must go, that's certain," rejoined her master.

Madame Jean fixed a hard, bold look on old Martin Prévost, and though the look was both bold and hard, it was a far better one than that which shot from his keen ferret eyes, and he quailed before it.

"Prosper Morel is a dangerous man," said she authoritatively.

"Bah!" grumbled Monsieur Prévost; "a man without a sou is never dangerous."

"You mistake," replied Madame Jean, "a man with ever so little money is not dangerous, but a man with none at all is; and I tell you, beware of Prosper Morel; don't cast him off, give him another chance." In everything Madame Jean seemed used to have her own way. She apparently ruled and governed, and when she retired from her master's presence, it was settled that Prosper Morel should be severely lectured by both Monsieur Prévost and herself, but that he should retain his office of bûcheron, and the abode it secured to him in the forest, on condition of good behaviour in future.

While this discussion was going on upstairs, another little scene, in immediate connection with it, was being enacted on the ground-floor. The window of a room at the back of the house, looking over a paved court, and beyond that to the garden, was open, and seated at it was a young man, in a well-padded arm-chair, listlessly and lazily smoking a cigar. A shadow fell across him, projected by the figure of a man who passed in front of the open window, and touched his cap as he did so.

"Good day, Prosper," said the young man in an indolent tone of voice.

"Salut, Monsieur Richard," mumbled the other, and went his way.

"Prosper," called the young man, "when will you bring me down those rods? The weather isn't at all bad for fishing, but my rods are all too short."

The man turned round, came back, and stood right in front of the window. He was decidedly disagreeable to look at, slouching, ungainly, clumsily put together. You could not help comparing him to those unfinished animals which are shown to us as nature's first efforts before the flood. He did not look bad, but unpleasant,—an incomplete product, with the mud and slime of that jelly period sticking to his features and limbs.

"I can't bring you the rods, Monsieur Richard," said he, in a thick, drawling voice, "for I am going away,—going for ever. Monsieur up there"—and he gave a jerk with his thumb in the direction of the first-floor—"has turned me away."

"What for?" inquired Monsieur Richard.

The man scratched his head, and looked more hopelessly stupid than before. "Oh, histoire de rien!" he drawled out; "histoire de Monsieur le Maire."

"Nonsense, Prosper," argued the young man, laying his cigar on the window-sill: "you can't go."

"I am going, Monsieur Richard," he rejoined; "but——" and everything in him

seemed, as it were, to set at that moment; lips, eyebrows, and hands, stiffened into an expression of brutish revengefulness that was still more stupid than threatening. Decidedly the ruling characteristic of the man was blockheadedness. I can find no other term.

"Nonsense, Prosper; hold your tongue!" rejoined Monsieur Richard. "Come round here into my room and tell me all about it. I must set you right with my uncle."

The man did as he was bid, and slouchingly skulked off to the back entrance. And certainly Monsieur Richard did look a likely person to make peace between people. He was so very blond and gentle-looking; not strong, decidedly, as Madame Jean had stated of him, but with an air of good-nature and delicate health that made you pity him and account for the evident laziness—it was more than indolence—of his nature.

As eleven o'clock was striking Monsieur le Vicomte came, and claimed the audience that had been promised him by Madame Jean, who was graciously pleased herself to introduce him into the same room on the first-floor in which we have already been made acquainted with the master of the house.

This room was Martin Prévost's sanc-

tuary. In it were assembled the several objects of his dearest care,—his correspondence, his account-books, and his safe. That same caisse de surté was about the only indication that Monsieur Prévost had ever allowed himself to afford to the outer world of his riches; and, naturally, legends had taken it for their basis in the little world of D—. It had come all the way from Paris, and fabulous sums were mentioned as its price. This infinitely annoyed Martin Prévost, and if he could have kept his wealth securely in his cellar, he would have done so gladly. Of course his natural instinct, as is that of his entire class, was to bury it, to hide it, but education and the age having left their impress on him, he resisted this impulse; and, sure enough, there in that safe were all Martin Prévost's securities, bonds, shares, obligations,—and cash.

Well; his visitor entered, and sat down, and having something really important to say, began—as in that case people invariably do—by speaking of something utterly unimportant, and irrelevant to the matter in hand.

There they were, face to face; the grandson of the Swiss valet de chambre and the “son of the crusaders;” and, ma foi! if the truth must be told, there was very little to choose between them as to mere external

aspect. Monsieur de Vérancour was not by any means aristocratic looking; not a bit of a François Premier, or a Maréchal de Richelieu, or a Lauzun, or any other type of the fiery grace and brilliant corruption of the past;—not an atom about him of the pale, tall, worn-out, exquisite old gentleman whom romanciers, as a rule, oppose to bull-headed blown-out boursiers, as the true representatives of an era you would fancy they deplored;—not a sign of all this in Monsieur le Vicomte. He was rather of the bull-headed type himself, and instead of having an aquiline nose, which, to be truthful, Martin Prévost had, his nose was a thick, stumpy nose; the black hairs which encircled his bald crown were bristles; his face was broad, and its colouring red-brown; his figure was stout and not very tall; and his hands were ugly, and the nails not clean. His dress was slovenly, and he looked like a man who used his limbs a good deal, and lived much in the open air in all weathers. His age was not much past fifty.

Between these two men, one made and the other marred by '89, was there then any difference at all? More than you suppose, but quite other than you think. For the present, we will go no further than mere manner. As they sat there opposite to each other, Martin Prévost seemed to have in

many respects the advantage of the two, but he lacked one thing which the Vicomte had, and that one thing was ease.

After having exhausted the subject of pears ;—old Prévost was a pear fancier, and the orchard at the Château was supposed to possess some wonderfully fine specimens of almost extinct sorts ;—Monsieur de Vérencour suddenly plunged into the subject for which he had so impatiently sought the present interview.

“ You are curious to know the business which brings me to you to-day ? ” said he with a smile. Old Prévost bowed stiffly, as though he wished to mark that he was not curious at all. “ Well, I have a great secret to tell you, and I rely entirely on your discretion, for such things must not be talked about. I am going to marry my eldest daughter——”

“ To Monsieur de Champmorin,” interrupted old Prévost in a freezing tone.

The Vicomte was very near giving a visible start, but did not do so.

“ You really are a magician ! ” exclaimed he with a laugh, “ but all the same I count on your discretion ; these things must not be talked about till they are absolutely settled.”

“ And this is not absolutely settled,” added old Prévost, half interrogatively, and

fixing his two small keen eyes on his visitor.

“ Well,—a marriage is only settled when the bridal mass is chanted,” replied the Vicomte, evasively.

“ Monsieur de Champmorin has thirty thousand francs a year now,” continued Martin Prévost, not unloosing his piercing gaze from his hearer’s countenance. “ He will have at his uncle’s death a house in Paris, in the neighbourhood of the General Post Office, that will give him fifteen thousand francs more, because that he will divide with his sister; the uncle leaves to both alike; but he will have his grand-aunt’s property all to himself at her death;—she’s near eighty now;—and Saulnois, if it was only decently attended to, ought to yield five-and-twenty thousand francs a year net. So you see thirty and fifteen are forty-five; and say only twenty,—because of course he’ll farm Saulnois ill!—that makes sixty-five thousand francs a year, first and last. Monsieur de Champmorin is out and out the best parti in the department. Have you any objection to make to him?” Martin Prévost asked this question, fixing his eyes still more like screws into the features of the Vicomte’s face; and then, before giving him time to answer, “ I know it has been said he drinks, and is violent, and ill brought up, and lives only with his farm servants,” he went on;

—“but that would hardly be objected to. Mademoiselle Félicie is very clever, and so saintly a person that she would perhaps win him into better conduct;—and then, in your society man and wife have so little need to be together! If les convenances are satisfied, that is the essential point,—the rest is only of consequence in our class, in little humble households;—but do tell me; you surely have no objections to make to Monsieur de Champmorin?”

No! the truth had to come out, whole and entire. Monsieur de Vérancour had no objection whatever to make to Monsieur de Champmorin; but Monsieur de Champmorin made one small requirement of him,—namely, that that most accomplished and most saintly person, Mademoiselle Félicie, should have a dot of some sort or kind. It had to come out, and it did come out, drawn bit by bit, but wholly and to the last morsel, by the pressure of Martin Prévost’s able and pitiless hand.

“So you would mortgage Les Grandes Bruyères; would you?” he abruptly asked when he knew all he wanted to know. “Well, Monsieur le Vicomte, you are best able to say what income that valuable property yields you;” and Monsieur Prévost commented upon these words with a smile imperceptibly ironical.

“Les Grandes Bruyères was the most

valuable portion of my great-grandfather's whole estate in this part of the country," replied quietly Monsieur de Vérancour.

"Was,—yes, granted; but what is it now? What does it yield you?"

"Oh, me? That is altogether another thing. I am too poor to farm such a property as it ought to be farmed; but you know what the land at Les Grandes Bruyères is worth, my dear Monsieur Prévost;" and in his turn the Vicomte fixed his eyes upon his interlocutor in a way that the latter did not find agreeable. The real truth of the matter was this: the bridegroom-elect of Mademoiselle Félicie had, after much discussion with his notary, and as much more between this functionary and the future father-in-law, agreed to limit his *préférences* to the sum of sixty thousand francs, *moyennant quoi*, he was content to take Mademoiselle Félicie "for better, for worse." It was a miserably small sum,—not three thousand pounds of English money,—and any one might see how, with his "hopes and expectations" and thirty thousand francs a year in hand, Monsieur de Champmorin was letting himself go dirt-cheap at such a price. It was a splendid "placement" for Mademoiselle Félicie; every atom of advantage was on her side. Words failed wherewith to paint the

generous disinterestedness of Monsieur de Champmorin ; but then, as his notary remarked, this was a “love match.” Such was the excuse urged, when this bridegroom, in such high financial condition, consented to be purchased for the paltry sum of sixty thousand francs ! And the public were expected to adopt his view of the transaction, and call it a “mariage d’amour !” But unluckily Monsieur de Vérancour had not the sixty thousand francs to give ! Do what he would, he could not scrape them together. This, however, led merely to prolonged discussion and to the acceptance of another form of payment by the Champmorin notary. Instead of the capital paid down, M. de Vérancour was to pay the annual interest upon it to his daughter, who was to receive three thousand francs a year, £120, paid quarterly,—£30 every three months ! Well, it was a cheap price for a husband, if you come to think of it ! But now came the difficulty ; how to raise the money !—Martin Prévost ! There was the solution ! And so Monsieur le Vicomte came to Martin Prévost, and had to tell him all, and leave not one little corner of his domestic embarrassments, however humiliating they might be, unrevealed. It had to be done, or all chance of placing Mademoiselle Félicie was at an end. At the end of half

an hour, then, Martin Prévost held the destinies of the Vérancour family in his hands.

The point at issue was this:—the property of Les Grandes Bruyères was worth one hundred and fifty thousand francs any day to a man less poor than the Vicomte;—worth that to be sold, and worth that for the income it would yield to any one capable of farming it properly. But to M. de Vérancour it was worth nothing, or worse than nothing; and his was the position of so many thousand needy landholders in France, to whom their land is a dead weight instead of a source of gain.

The long and the short of it was, that Martin Prévost, refusing inflexibly to lend one farthing upon any security whatever, and all idea of a mortgage being at an end, condescended at last to promise to purchase Les Grandes Bruyères for the sum of seventy thousand francs, the “odd ten” being destined to the trousseau and inevitable marriage expenses. But how they had haggled, before they got to this conclusion, they alone can understand who have had the misfortune to be mixed up in France with “marrying and giving in marriage.”

“But why not at once give Mademoiselle Félicie her dot of sixty thousand francs, since I buy Les Grandes Bruyères, and you get the money?” inquired old Prévost.

“Because with half the sum I can quintuple it in a year,” replied the Vicomte sagaciously.

“Ah!” drawled out old Prévost; “you can quintuple it, can you? Well, I wish I knew that secret! But you gentlefolks have a vivacity of intelligence that is surprising sometimes to us mere plodders and hard-working bourgeois.”

“I must not tell you yet,” resumed Monsieur de Vérancour, with an air of diplomatic importance, “but there is an affair about to be launched that will make millionaires of all those who are connected with it; I have friends at the head of it, and—” he stopped suddenly, as though on the brink of violating some awful secret; “and when the time comes,” he resumed, “I will try to interest you in it too.”

“Serviteur;” answered old Prévost, with a profound bow. “I am infinitely obliged.”

Just as Monsieur de Vérancour got up to go, the money-lender spoke again. “There seems to me to be one little difficulty about your arrangements, Monsieur le Vicomte,” murmured Martin Prévost blandly; “you will pay to Madame de Champmorin the yearly sum of three thousand francs, but when you come to marry Mademoiselle Geneviève you will have to do precisely the same thing. She can force

you to do it by law. What will you dispose of then? I may be dead by that time, and you may perhaps not find any one so anxious to do you a service.” He called the operation he had just been engaged upon by this name!

Monsieur de Vérancour turned round, and with a broad frank smile, “Vévette!” echoed he; “oh! Vévette will never marry. Vévette will go into a convent at her majority. It will be impossible to prevent her; and if she should change her mind, why, I shall by that time be able to give her such a dot as will enable her to marry a duke and a peer.”

“Well, by that time I shall probably be dead,” again repeated old Prévost, following his visitor to the door of the room; “but don’t forget Mademoiselle Vévette. She is a very charming young lady, and the law will force you to give precisely the same advantages to the two sisters.”

When Monsieur le Vicomte de Vérancour was in the street, and trudging home as fast as he could, in order to write by post time to the Champmorin notary that all was made smooth now for the “placing” of his daughter Félicie in her most romantic “love match,” he never once asked himself what impelled old Martin Prévost to take such a lively interest in the destiny of his daughter Vévette.

CHAPTER III.

THE SISTERS.

THE Château, as it was termed, more often derisively than otherwise, had really once upon a time been the seigniorial residence of D——, but the ancestors of the Vérancour family were not its possessors then. It had come to them by marriage. Somewhere about the end of the sixteenth century a daughter of the house of Beauvoisin, the chief of which was the then châtelain and lord of D——, had been given in marriage by Henry IV. to the son of a recently ennobled échevin of Angers, whose riches, acquired no one precisely knew how, were regarded by the practical monarch as a sufficient compensation for want of birth. Both sides—Beauvoisins as well as Vérancours—were Protestants, but after that historical mass to which the Béarnois so promptly made up his mind as the price for the Crown of France, Vérancours and Beauvoisins, and the greater part of their families, went all in

a heap together back again into the venerable bosom of Mother Church. Of the old Beauvoisin race there were soon none left. They had dated from before the Crusades, and had never been anything but warriors, who, being inapt at learning any useful art or trade, had been absorbed by those who could. It was an act of grace and honesty on the part of the Vérancour people that they did not assume the name of the extinct family, but they assumed a vast deal more than its pride, and a more over-bearing set never were known. Their own name, their patronymic, dating from the thirteenth century, was Saunier; which made it probable that some ancestor of theirs had originally dug or traded in salt from the salt-marshes of Brittany; but of this name, which, associated with that of Vérancour, they had borne under the Valois kings, all trace was rubbed out even in their own memories. They were “sons of crusaders” to all intents and purposes, had grown prejudiced precisely in the inverse ratio to their power, and were landed in this hard high-pressure nineteenth century of ours with all the attributes and incapacities belonging to races whose *raison d'être* is no more.

There was an enormous difference between these last descendants of the Sauniers de Vérancour and their own great grandfathers

of the Court of Versailles. These people believed in themselves, whilst the others made believe to do so. The wealthy “ennoblis” of the times of Louis XIV. and Louis XV. shared with a large number of grand seigneurs the consciousness of the surprise their own fathers would have felt at seeing the grandeur they had achieved.* Whereas after the destroying angel of '89 had jumbled the old and the new into one uniform mass, leaving no particular sign to any individual victim, all came together at the resurrection of 1815,—above all, too, after the grand tragi-comedy of the Empire,—as equal. From the equality of suffering they inferred the equality of caste, and swamping any minor differences, agreed to set themselves apart from the rest of their fellows.

To this plan the smallest provincial families, totally oblivious of their origin, adhered with marvellous tenacity, and what is more marvellous still, the rest of the world did its best to take them at their word. The priests honoured them, society tempted them, the really illustrious houses of the land intermarried with them, all governments coquetted with them, the

* The Duc de Gesvres (Potier), for instance, who upon one occasion at Court, addressed thus one of his colleagues:—“M. le Duc! what would our fathers in heaven say, if they could see us where we are?”

peasantry sneered at them, and the bourgeoisie abhorred them, as if they sprang indisputably from Brahma's eyebrow or Jupiter's thigh. Whatever might be the purity or impurity of the blood in their veins, they fully enjoyed the advantages and disadvantages of the position they attributed to themselves, and in many instances gave extraordinary examples of self-renunciation and of sacrifice to what they termed the respect for their names. Our friend, the worthy Vicomte de Véancour, was a fine specimen of his kind, of what he called his "order." He really was allied to whatever was noblest, not only in his department, but as far away as that magnificent temple whereof they of the Parisian Faubourg St. Germain are the high priests. He was very poor, had been obliged to educate poorly, and had condemned to many privations, his two daughters, whom he dearly loved; but he looked upon his poverty as a distinction, and thought it was his duty to behave as he did, and that it was incumbent upon him at any cost to be what he called "true to his name."

The Château at D—— might, ages ago, have been an agreeable abode, when its possessors had wealth sufficient to procure what were the relative comforts and luxuries

of the period, but it was a miserable place for two young women to inhabit in our day. Built, as are often baronial castles in the west of France, considerably below the village or town dependent upon it in days of yore, its first unavoidable evil was dampness, and want of air on all sides save one. It was decidedly unwholesome;—no one denied that. Then, although it was not large of its kind, it was much too large for its inhabitants, and they had to huddle themselves into holes and corners, where the torn and soiled furniture that had escaped the outrages of the past could be turned to the best use. Women, and more than any other, French women, can contrive to make something out of nothing, and by the time the two Mesdemoiselles de Vérancour had been six months home from their convent at Poitiers, they really had converted the set of rooms appropriated to themselves and their father on the ground-floor into a presentable suite of chambers for a family of reduced means. There was enough of discomfort, as we English people might think,—you habitually entered the house through the kitchen, and in the Vicomte's study you would be suddenly reminded by the fall of something soft and plump upon the floor of the presence of frogs; but resignation was the virtue of this

family, and it was thought the right thing to submit to everything for the sake of—— what it might puzzle you or me to specify distinctly, but they knew, and were satisfied with their own magnanimity.

I have said that there was one side of the Château which was open to the winds of heaven, and on that side a tolerably broad terrace, planted with acacias, lime and nut trees, delightfully cool and shady in summer, was the open-air boudoir of the two sisters, Félicie and Geneviève, or Vévette, as she was by abbreviation usually called. This had originally formed part of the castle ramparts, and had been one of the outworks meant to defend the town and fortress of D—— against any inroad on the part of the Bretons. If you crossed over the broad stone parapet on one side, you could see down straight into a well-kept lane which led round the castle premises up to the town, and branched off about half a league lower down from the high road to Chôlet.

It was a bright beautiful October afternoon, a few days after the Vicomte's visit to Martin Prévost. The two sisters were sitting at the stone table at the end of the terrace. Baskets full of work and working materials were before them. The trees overhead were rich in their russet clothing, there was not a breath of wind stirring, and the warm soft sunlight flooded the meadows and

pasture lands that spread out in front, and beyond the limit of the Château's present domains.

"Is that the Angelus already?" asked Félicie, listening to the bell of the parish church of D—— ringing out six o'clock. "Is Monsieur le Curé coming to supper to-night?"

"I think not," was the reply.

In the provinces, and where the woman-kind of such families as these come together, it is impossible that a quarter of an hour should elapse without mention being made of a curé.

"Then suppose we look at the *Monde Illustré*," observed Félicie, drawing from the bottom of the large work-basket, where they lay hidden, two or three back numbers of an illustrated journal which a cousin, living at Tours, a lady of a worldly turn of mind, was in the habit of sending now and then to the two girls. "What is the matter, Vévette; what are you dreaming of?" she added, looking at her sister, who, with her work laid down upon her knee, was apparently gazing at vacancy, whilst the tears were gathering in her eyes.

"I was thinking of la mère Marie-Claire," said Vévette gently; "the sound of the Angelus suddenly reminded me of her, and of our convent days."

"La mère Marie-Claire was so devotedly

fond of you, that it is no wonder you loved her, and regret her now she's dead," rejoined Félicie, with rather a sententious air; "but, for a well-born woman, I must say, Vévette, that a worse example can hardly be conceived than the one she gave."

"Do you really think that, sister?" inquired the younger girl, timidly adding with a sigh: "Poor dear, sweet mère Marie-Claire! how lovely she was! and how like an angel she looked in the last few months of her life!"

"Vévette!" retorted the elder sister, with all the sternness so handsome a "saint" could command; "pray do not misapply terms. Mère Marie-Claire, who, I grieve to say, was distantly related to mamma, may have been a person to be pitied, and we will hope she is forgiven. Monsieur le Curé says it is allowable to pray for her. But she was assuredly no angel; and a more rebellious woman cannot be imagined. Why, she actually died of it! What made her take the veil, pray, if not that she preferred being a nun to marrying the man her parents had chosen for her?"

"But she said she could not love him," argued humbly Vévette.

Félicie curled her lips proudly. "What has a well-born, piously brought up girl to

do with such reasoning as that?" she exclaimed. "The real fact is even worse than what I said just now; the real fact is, that the misguided woman took the veil because she could not marry the man she pretended she loved."

"But he was her equal. I believe he was her own cousin," urged Vévette, blushing deeply at her audacity.

"Equal, maybe," rejoined Félicie, "but they had no money between them, and the parents would not hear of it. No! mère Marie-Claire I hope repented of her errors, but in plain terms it cannot be denied that she positively died for love."

"And—really, Félicie," murmured her sister tremblingly, after a pause of a few seconds, "do you think that it is so very dreadful a crime?"

"Think?" retorted the other. "Oh, Vévette! mère Marie-Claire committed a greater sin than I could have thought her capable of, if in her long talks with you she put such improper ideas into your head. I hope you have confessed all this to Monsieur le Curé."

"I will," promised poor Vévette, turning her head; "but I don't know that I ever thought of it all so much before. I don't know why I suddenly seemed to remember poor mère Marie-Claire so well. It must

have been the Angelus. Do you remember the sound of our bell at the Visitation?"

"No indeed, my dear," answered Félicie with a smile, and unfolding her newspapers. "Just look," she cried; "here is the whole account of the Fêtes of the 15th August."

"But that's six weeks ago," objected Vévette.

"No matter; such things are always fresh. There was a grand ball at the Hôtel de Ville, and here is a long description of all the dresses." And Félicie's eye ran eagerly down the column, and she occasionally stopped to chronicle her admiration of some special toilet. "Oh, this must have been lovely!" she all at once exclaimed; "listen! pink crape with water-lilies, and the coiffure, water-lilies with pearls plaited into the hair. I wonder who wore that? I wonder if she was beautiful? When I am married, I shall enjoy a few weeks in Paris in the winter——"

"Félicie!"

"Why not? It is the right thing to do. Of course I should not go to the Hôtel de Ville balls,—though I believe now, there are some people who do; but our relations and Monsieur de Champmorin's too, in the Faubourg St. Germain, give magnificent fêtes."

"And you will go to Paris, sister?"

asked Vévette. "I should be frightened out of my senses if I only set my foot in one of its streets. Why, it is worse than Babylon!"

"Possibly," replied the other demurely; "but when a well-born woman is married she owes a great deal to her name and position in the world, and to her husband and his family. She must make sacrifices every day. All Monsieur de Champmorin's family live more or less in Paris, and I believe his uncle wishes him to be a Deputy. I must think of him, and of the future position of our children."

It was not in Vévette's gentle heart to retaliate, but in her heart she questioned whether Félicie ought not also to betake herself to confession, and submit to Monsieur le Curé her strange mental preoccupations touching pink crape dresses, and head-dresses composed of water-lilies and pearls interwoven in the hair. Vévette rose from her seat, and leant over the wall of the old rampart.

"Good evening, mademoiselle," drawled out a languid voice from the road beneath.

"Félicie," said Vévette, turning round, "it is Monsieur Richard. He has got little Charlot behind him with a basket full of fish."

Félicie joined her sister, and with con-

descending grace looked down on Monsieur Richard. He lifted up the green leaves in the basket, and discovered a fine fat carp.

"That is a good big fish," he remarked carelessly ; "the rest are not worth much ;" and then deferentially raising his broad-brimmed felt hat, made his request. "Would it be too great presumption," he asked, "if I requested the favour of presenting my personal respects to Monsieur le Vicomte some day soon, before leaving D——?"

"Dear me ! Monsieur Richard," rejoined Félicie, "are you about to leave D—— ? Has Monsieur votre oncle obtained some Government situation for you ?"

"Not that," was the answer, "but my uncle is kind enough to think that at three-and-twenty it is well to see something of the world, and I am going to Paris for some months."

"To Paris!" ejaculated both the sisters at once. "Will you not be dreadfully lonely without any friends or acquaintances? In such a place as Paris, what will you do with yourself?"

"Well," retorted the young man, "I do not think anybody with plenty of money to spend is likely to remain long lonely in Paris, and my uncle has been very generous to me."

"Indeed," said Félicie. "Well, I am

sure I wish you success, Monsieur Richard. Any day before breakfast you can come to the Château. I daresay papa will receive you. Bon soir."

The day was waning, and the two girls gathered up their work, Vévette carrying the basket.

"The idea of that old Prévost sending his nephew to Paris!" remarked Félicie. "I wonder what will become of him!"

"But you know, don't you, that he is to be enormously rich?" remarked Vévette.

"What they call rich," added scornfully her sister.

"What any one would call rich," urged Vévette. "Why, Félicie, they say old Prévost has above a hundred thousand francs a year, and he will leave every penny to Monsieur Richard. You'll see he'll marry one of the daughters of those nouveaux riches, and buy all D—— one of these fine days."

"A hundred thousand francs a year," repeated musingly Félicie, as they prepared to enter the house. "He'll give his wife diamonds and run horses at the races." And then she sighed, and said devoutly, "What a horrible state of things!"

CHAPTER IV.

MARTIN PREVOST'S AMBITION.

A WEEK passed by. It was the 12th of October. Old Prévost had called his nephew into his room, and there the two sat together, on either side of the long bureau-table, while the legendary “caisse de sûreté” raised its cumbrous shape between the two windows, right in front of Monsieur Richard, whilst his uncle sat with his back towards it.

There was no resemblance between them ; —not one single trait in common had they. The uncle's hard, sharp, vulture-like features were not reproduced in the rather weak mould in which those of the nephew had been cast. The old man's thin lips were very different from the full, red, sensual mouth of the young man opposite to him, and his piercing eyes utterly outshone Monsieur Richard's mild blue ones, with their rather vague, wandering glances. One thing was a pity ; Monsieur Richard's eye-

lids were delicate, and every now and then got inflamed, which took from the pleasantness of his aspect, for he really was otherwise what may be termed good-looking. There was, if you will, a certain dulness in his air ; I won't say that he looked exactly stupid, but there was a total absence of light about him. You would swear that if he had been in the place of any of his elders of the Prévost stock, he would never have known how to make the fortunes they had made. No ; stiff, sharp old Martin Prévost, as he sat there, straight-backed and all of a piece, was the evident superior of that fair-haired, round-faced, delicate young man. But then this is a degenerate age, and the money having been made by wiser, stronger men, it was enough that the mediocre but truly amiable inheritor of it all should make a good use of it ;—and that Monsieur Richard undoubtedly would do.

“ Now that I have given you most of the necessary details about your stay in Paris, and the principal friends you will find there,” said old Prévost, continuing a conversation begun some half an hour before, “ it is necessary that I should inform you of what my plans for your future are.”

“ Any that you form I shall follow,” replied the nephew with a bow.

“ Yes,” answered the old man as blandly

as it lay in his nature to do. “I have never had any complaint to make of you, Richard ; you have always been obedient and well-conducted ; and though you have no turn for affairs, I consider you thoroughly capable of doing credit to the position I have achieved. You start from where I leave off, Richard. I remain a plodding plebeian. You must be a gentleman. You must complete yourself by marriage. I have told you ever since you were a boy of fifteen to look forward to that. I have told you to familiarise yourself with the people down at the Château as much as you could. Well ! why do you shake your head ?”

“ Because, dear uncle, I have tried, but they won’t let me ! They are familiar enough with me, for that matter, but it is the familiarity that is used towards an inferior.”

“ They don’t know how rich you are,” interrupted old Prévost.

Monsieur Richard shook his head again. “ To say the whole truth,” he added, “ the Vicomte treats me like a lacquey.”

“ Bah !” broke out old Prévost with a fierce bitterness of contempt, “ they would marry a lacquey if he only brought them money enough. I tell you, nephew, you shall be Monsieur le Vicomte’s son-in-law. I am in treaty now for the domain of

Châteaubréville down in the Mayenne, and before the year is out you shall be Monsieur Prévost de Châteaubréville, and your noble spouse,"—this was said with a sneer,—“shall do the honours of your house to the whole department. I do not destine you to be a Deputy, Richard. I mean to keep that for myself,” and the old man looked as he spoke capable of sterner efforts than are required to compel the attention of the Corps Législatif. “I will be the Deputy, you shall be of the Conseil-Général. Who knows? President of it, perhaps. Money will do anything! And I will carry through the direct line of railway from Paris. When once we've got that,—besides the new coal-fields,—it shall be my fault if any of the new men in Paris,—were it even the Péreires themselves,—are richer than me. But the first thing is your marriage.”

Monsieur Richard's eyes had been actually flashing light all this while, as he listened to his uncle's words. He knew old Prévost's indisputable capacity, and knew also how small men had made enormous fortunes; and at the concluding phrase he blushed all over with delight.

“If it were possible, dear uncle,” he exclaimed, “it would indeed be a brilliant dream for——”

“Probably,” interrupted the old man,

"you've gone and formed some inclination, as people call it, for that scornful princess; that is of no sort of consequence;" and he waved his hand, as if setting aside all such nonsense; "but there is no harm in it. What is important is that I hold those Véran-cours in my hand, and that on the day after to-morrow, on Thursday, at two o'clock, I shall put my signature side by side with Monsieur le Vicomte's to an act that will make him my dependent. He has sold me Les Grandes Bruyères. I have had all the acts and contracts made out. I pay him the money at two o'clock on Thursday next; but an hour after that I wouldn't advise Monsieur le Vicomte to play me any tricks, because I can destroy with one word the entire combination for which he wants the cash."

"You know I never question you, uncle," said Monsieur Richard; but he looked all interrogation.

"No; you are exceedingly discreet," replied old Prévost, "and as the whole concerns you, I will trust you.—The Vicomte must have sixty thousand francs, or Champmorin won't marry the girl. I give him seventy thousand, and the marriage takes place. But by this proceeding he defrauds the other sister, for he has literally not a farthing left to give her. The Château won't

sell for twenty thousand francs ; and if I show the real state of the case to Champmorin's notary, the business is done. Champmorin will withdraw, for he would have to refund,—besides all the éclat of the matter ; and then Monsieur le Vicomte would have both his daughters upon his hands, and be minus the only bit of tolerable property he had to dispose of."

"But, uncle !" stammered the young man, upon whose countenance there had gathered all this while a cloud of anxiety that his interlocutor did not notice. "Uncle, I knew nothing of all this ! Which of the sisters is going to be married ?"

"Which ?" echoed old Prévost, impatiently. "Why Mademoiselle Félicie, to be sure ; who else should it be ? With whom are we concerned, if not with Vévette ?"

His nephew gasped, and, for a moment or two, could not speak.

"Why, what ails the boy ?" exclaimed old Prévost, transfixing the unhappy Monsieur Richard with a look that was full of the bitterest contempt. "You haven't been offering your hand, have you, to Monsieur de Champmorin's charming bride ; to that —— ?" Here he stopped short, and no epithet came, but the expression of his countenance was not complimentary to

Mademoiselle Félicie. "Richard!" he resumed, in a very calm tone, "you will do well to listen to what I say: I have decided that Mademoiselle Geneviève shall be your wife, and on that condition I have told you what a position you shall enjoy; but if any obstacle to that arrangement were to come from you, I would immediately alter my will, and instead of being a rich man and a personnage one of these days, you should find yourself all at once in the position of my grandfather when he began life. I would not leave you one centime."

Poor Monsieur Richard was pale as death, and seemed as though he were internally convulsed. Externally he trembled a little.

"Uncle," said he in an unsteady voice, "you never told me that you preferred one of the sisters to the other, and—"

"Told you!" echoed old Prévost; "why should I go explaining my intentions to you, before the time was come to act?"

"But, dear uncle," pleaded Monsieur Richard, "it was not my fault if—"

"Who cares whether it is your fault or not?" retorted Martin Prévost. "One thing he well assured of, that while I live Mademoiselle Félicie shall never be my niece. You idiot!" he added; "it is so like the wretched weaklings of your kind, the miserable products of this sensual age,

to be attracted by a girl of that description. Why, you would not have been her husband half a year before you would be coming here to me whining and crying to be delivered from her! I know that young lady, though she doesn't yet know herself. I knew her grandmother, Monsieur le Vicomte's blessed mother, and that girl is every inch Madame Dorothée;—la belle Madame Dorothée! Yes, handsome she was, God knows, and some few are living who remember what she was besides:—all of which didn't prevent her going to mass every day of her life, and to confession twice a month,—for she was by way of being a dévote, too,—though devotion was easier to manage thirty or forty years ago than it is now, since the reign of the Jesuits in France."

"But, uncle," ventured to say the unhappy youth, "Mademoiselle Félicie is not yet nineteen, and has only been a year out of a convent. She cannot yet——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted old Prévost; "hold your tongue, Richard, about the whole thing. It shall not be. And now, as this topic must never be reverted to, I will just once for all speak my mind to you, and you will reflect upon what I say, and see if you can agree. You are like all the men of your time. They call themselves

men." This was uttered with an indescribable sneer. " You are dishonest." The nephew started. " I don't mean that you would steal ; but you won't pay. You want to enjoy, to enjoy always, without doing anything else, and you want to escape paying for it ; that's what I call dishonest, and that is the characteristic of you all. The men of my time worked and paid its full price for whatever they achieved. Look at me ; I've worked for forty years,— worked hard, and plodded not only through work, but through privations and through humiliations. Do you suppose I should ever have been as wealthy as I am if they who have helped to enrich me had dreamt I was ambitious ? No ! I have been scrupulously honest according to the present value of the word, but I have profited by the weaknesses of my neighbours, and I should never have known them if I had been thought of as anything save ' le bon homme Prévost.' Wealth ! power even ! they don't mind that, so long as they fancy you can never use it to trouble their vanity. I ambitious ! Bless my soul ! I was only a money-getting machine, a humble, narrow-minded bourgeois, who knew nothing of politics, but only put sou upon sou and helped his betters out of difficulties by lending them the sums they couldn't get else-

where ! I, ‘le bon homme Prévost !’ Lord bless you, I didn’t exist ! But now, my time is come, too, and I will have my enjoyment, for I have paid for it.”

“And no one will be so rejoiced at your success as I shall be,” put in the nephew cautiously.

“I am only sixty-two,” continued Martin Prévost, careless of the interruption. “I have the strength of unspent years in store, for I have capitalised my health, as well as my money. I have fifteen years before me, during which I will have my enjoyment. I shall remain, as I told you, a plodding plebeian, but I will plod to some purpose, and on a higher field than I have had yet. There is the good of the empire ; the forces from below come into play now, and the forces from above are annihilated, though they don’t see it. They get the titles, and crosses, and Chamberlain’s keys, and their vanity is content ; they have nothing else ; but we of the lower ranks get the power. Now you see, Richard, I will make a gentleman of you, and you shall represent something. But I will rule your fortunes, and will not have for my niece a woman who would try to rule me.”

Monsieur Richard permitted himself a vehement gesture of dénégation.

“Stuff!” said the uncle, sternly. “Mademoiselle Félicie was just the sort of girl to seize hold of a weak and vicious imagination. Don’t be offended, Richard! The imaginations of the young men of your age now-a-days are all vicious, because the men are all weak;—all half-natures! But that is no matter. Mademoiselle Félicie will be Madame de Champmorin in six weeks, and when I have paid the money down for Les Grandes Bruyères, the Vicomte, in spite of his pride, will not refuse me Mademoiselle Vévette, who is really an excellent girl, and manageable. When you come back from Paris, Monsieur Prévost de Châteaubréville, you shall marry her, and when you are somewhat over forty you will inherit all my wealth, be a personnage, I tell you again, and marry your own daughters to penniless marquises or even dukes, if you choose.”

“Oh! uncle, uncle!” sighed his nephew.

The countenance of old Prévost underwent a slight change. Looking steadfastly at Monsieur Richard,—looking at him, as it were, through and through, he said,—“I’ll tell you what you think would be just and proper. You think that because you are young you ought to be able to satisfy all your desires; you would like to have the position I can give you, and the

woman you choose to fancy, besides ; you would like my earnings and your own will. No, no, Richard, you must pay too ; you must pay by submission and by patience ! After to-morrow Mademoiselle Félicie will be out of your reach. You must make up your mind to it. You will have the estate of Châteaubréville, and a Demoiselle de Vérancour for the mother of your children, who will be very rich ; and what have you done for all that ?" and he took in the whole of his nephew, as it were, at one glance, and said, scornfully, "Nothing !"

Poor Monsieur Richard ! He shrunk together, and attempted no further resistance. It might be very painful, but, as Mephisto says, "He was neither the first, nor would he be the last." This same conversation has been gone through, or will be gone through, by more or less every son and every nephew in France ; therefore the hardship is after all a common one.

When the conversation was ended, poor Monsieur Richard begged his uncle's pardon for having dreamt of thwarting him, and promised he would do his best to get over his disappointment and accept his uncle's plans for him with fitting readiness and gratitude. Poor young man ! The traces of the struggle were visible on his face, by its increased pallor, by the redness of

his eyelids, and by a circle of dark blue that had hollowed itself under his eyes.

All was over. Monsieur Richard was to leave for Paris in a week, and next Thursday Mademoiselle Félicie was to be in possession of a dot that would enable her to become Madame de Champmorin.

But Destiny sometimes foils even the best calculators. When Thursday came, old Martin Prévost was lying at the foot of his great big iron safe, his face upon the floor, his two arms stretched out before him, and the back of his head beaten in by blows. The master of the strong box was murdered, the strong box was broken open, and all the ready money in bank notes and cash had disappeared. There had been what we call burglary, and what the French law terms “*vol avec effraction*.”

CHAPTER V.

POOR MONSIEUR RICHARD'S RICHES.

THE effect produced by such a tragedy in a little place like D——, does not require to be described. For twenty miles round it spread its terror; but in the centre of action itself, it exercised a vivifying power. The collective life of D—— was quintupled. Every one's mind was busy upon the same subject, and at the same time. If a conversation began on any other topic, it was sure, before five minutes were over, to find its way round to the assassination of Martin Prévost; and, whether they who conversed were peasants or shopkeepers, you would have been equally astonished, had you overheard them, to note the extraordinary aptitude of all for the discharge of duties appertaining to the police. Each man,—and, for that matter, each woman, too,—had his or her notion about the murderer, and was the inventor of a trap in which the criminal must be infallibly caught, and

which, on the part of the said inventor, proved a wiliness, a depth of calculation, and an instinct of the manners and ways of crime, that so far as the moral condition of this rural population was concerned, was not pleasant. The officers of justice only seemed gifted with true administrative dulness, and the process of "instruction," as it is called, elicited, as it dragged on its pedantic course, remarks not flattering to judicial sharpness from the public. For the public knew everything, however secret; and, above all, whatever was surrounded with unusual precautions as to secrecy. The greffier of the Juge de Paix talked to his wife; the Maire talked to his married daughter; the huissier du tribunal confided in his bonne; the doctor who had examined the body transmitted his impressions to all his patients; and all the dévotes discussed the matter with Monsieur le Curé and his Vicaire. Then the beadle, who was married to Madelon, the Maire's cook, and the sacristan, whose wife collected the money for the chairs during divine service, and was charwoman twice a week at the private establishment of the principal grocer,—all these served as so many channels of communication, and from conduit to conduit conveyed the whole current of information from its head source in the cabinet of the

Juge d'Instruction down to the kitchen of the humblest ménagère. But the worst of all was the brigadier de gendarmerie. This official, by name Fréderick Herrenschmidt, a gigantic Alsatian, was the devoted and pretty well avowed suitor of Madame Jean; and from "Monsieur Frédéri," as she styled him, awful as he might be to the general public of D——, she contrived to extract the minutest details. Madame Jean was reputed a rich woman, and being the widow of a lazy drunkard, to whom she was married twenty-five years back, and whose backslidings she had brooded over during a twenty years' widowhood, she had never brought herself to trust sufficiently any "man of woman born," to resign to him the disposal of her little fortune. "Sophie," as her dead master (but he alone) called her, had been the presiding genius of the Prévost household for a quarter of a century, and had never cheated old Martin of one sou. She made his interest hers, because he made hers his; and by dint of placing, as he had done, here a hundred francs, and there a hundred francs of her savings during this long space of time, Madame Jean was possessed of somewhere about the sum of twenty thousand francs, and this wealth of hers was the cause that, court her as he might, she could not make

up her mind to marry the gendarme. Madame Jean was a fine bold specimen of a strong-nerved French female of forty-five; but though her vanity was well developed, her caution and covetousness overtopped it. She liked to overawe the wives and maidens of D—— as the sharer of the military authority of the place, and she not only tolerated, but exacted the utmost homage of Monsieur Frédéri; but to take him, for better for worse, was what she could not resolve to do, for she had a shrewd notion that however much a union with this stalwart son of Mars might be the better for her, it would probably be the worse for her money. So Madame Jean, who had no human being to leave her riches to, and who never spent anything, but went on saving, refused to become Madame Herrenschmidt, but reigned supreme over the soul of the brigadier, and was possessed of all the knowledge he had no business to impart.

Whatever her other faults, Madame Jean had all the helpfulness of a Frenchwoman, and, had it not been for her care and activity and sense, poor Monsieur Richard would have died, or gone mad, from the effect of his uncle's sudden and terrible death. Richard Prévost was no hero,—that the reader scarcely requires to be told,

—and since it was proved to him that the house he inhabited had been broken into, that an assassin had actually passed before the door of the room in which he slept, in order to creep up the stairs and enter his uncle's room immediately over his head, the unfortunate young man seemed possessed by the idea that the same thing might happen again any day, and that the next victim would inevitably be himself.

“ You don't expect me to come and sleep in your room, do you,” cried Madame Jean, hoping to rouse him by indignation, “ as Prosper's wife used to do when you were a little child ? ”

“ Certainly not, my dear Madame Jean ; but I cannot help thinking that it would be a proper precaution if the brigadier were to sleep in the house.”

At this Madame Jean drew herself up, as though she had been already the gendarme's lawful spouse, and told Monsieur Richard that he was ignorant of the stern obligations of *le devoir militaire* !

“ Nicolas can sleep in the passage,” suggested she. Nicolas was the out-door man.

“ Nicolas ? ” was the distrustful reply.

“ Well, you don't think he would let himself be killed and carried away without making a noise, do you ? ”

But Monsieur Richard shook his head

and seemed to incline towards a totally different kind of alarm, at which Madame Jean exclaimed—"For shame! it is unchristianlike and unlawful to be suspecting everybody in that way. Why, Monsieur Richard, there's no end to that kind of thing! You'll be suspecting me, next! Poor old Prosper!—though I never liked him with his nasty underhand sulky ways—still, I do feel for him now."

"So do I," rejoined Richard; "but you cannot say I have done or said anything to incriminate him; for, strange to say, from the very first, something seemed to tell me that the man was not guilty."

"And I believe you are quite right, Monsieur Richard." And, coming nearer to him, and speaking cautiously, "I happen to know," added Madame Jean, "that there is not so much as the shadow of a proof;—nay, more—there's no ground on which you can rest even a suspicion touching Prosper Morel. I have no business to go revealing all this; but I do know it, and I go out of my direct duty to tell it you because your nerves are all jarred and out of order by this dreadful event, and it may comfort you to know that you have not had an assassin going about the house. You might get into a way of suspecting everybody. Your nerves are terribly shattered."

"Yes, they are; you are right there; but surely there has been enough to shake the nerves of a stronger man than me; and alas! I never was strong; but I am glad about poor old Prosper; as you say, he is not a pleasant person; but to be accused of such a heinous crime! Brrrr!" and he shuddered all over, "that must be fearful. Poor man! we must try and make it up to him somehow."

As the reader will have guessed, the first direction taken by the suspicions of justice was towards Prosper Morel. The man's character, the circumstance of the complaint made against him a week before by the Maire and taken up so vigorously by his employer that his dismissal had been decided upon by the latter,—all this naturally militated against the woodcutter, and before the day of the murder was ended a mandat d'améner had been made out, and the gendarmes had arrested Prosper. They found him at his work, a good way out in the forest, and his behaviour at once introduced into Monsieur Frédéri's mind certain doubts of his culpability. It was evening when they discovered him, sitting astride upon a newly-felled tree, whose last branches he was leisurely lopping off, whilst he droned out a gloomy Breton cantique to the Holy Virgin. He was just finishing his

day's work, and preparing to go home to his hut. When he perceived the gendarmes before him he saluted them civilly, and was about to gather up his tools. They seized him, before explaining to him why; but when the explanation came he was stupefied, not alarmed. The brigadier was an old hand, and had experience in criminals, and he felt instinctively that the bûcheron was not one. The man was stolidly unconscious, and his complete ignorance of what had passed was evident and undeniable. Nevertheless, he was immediately imprisoned, preventively, severely treated, harassed and worried in every possible way, examined and cross-examined, and the palpable proofs of his innocence, which seemed to increase almost hourly, were received with regret by his pursuers—but they were received. Beyond presumption, nothing pointed at Prosper in the details of the crime,—except that it must have been committed by some one who was intimately acquainted with old Prévost's habits, and with the ways of his house.

The mode of the assassination was tolerably clear. The victim must have been standing in front of his safe when the blow was dealt. The blow was dealt from behind, and with extraordinary coolness and certainty and force. Of the three medical men who were called in to visit the corpse, all

were of the same opinion,—namely, that the first blow had suspended life, and that when the others were given, they were dealt merely to make assurance doubly sure. There was comparatively little blood, and what there was had flowed downwards upon the floor, after the murdered man had fallen. None had spurted out, and there were no stains on any article of furniture.

Now, as to the time at which the act was committed, that was also easy to determine; it must have been between the hours of six and ten in the morning. Old Prévost was a perfectly wound-up machine as to his habits, and never deviated from the monotonous regularity he had marked out for himself. Summer and winter, he always rose at five. At six he sat down to his bureau, and busied himself with accounts and calculations till eight. At eight he sometimes took a stroll in the garden, or even a short walk out of doors, but as often he remained in his own room. Till ten o'clock began striking it was not necessary that any one should be acquainted with the whereabouts of Martin Prévost; but when the tenth stroke had struck from a dusty, wheezy old clock in the passage, instantly the voice of Madame Jean was to be heard calling out in a loud tone, "Monsieur, the breakfast is served."

Now, when, on that fatal Thursday, Madame Jean's voice had sent forth its regular call, nothing stirred. Madame Jean's temper was at once irritated by this piece of unpunctuality, and after three minutes had elapsed she repeated the summons. Still no answer. Madame Jean ascended the stairs, angrily opened the door of her master's room, and saw the sight we have described in our last chapter. Her screams attracted Monsieur Richard, who was in attendance in the dining parlour, awaiting his uncle's presence. The poor young man, whose nervous system was less robust than Madame Jean's, was so overcome by the ghastly scene, that he fainted dead away, and Madame Jean had to raise him as well as she could, and busy herself with recalling him to his senses. Before this was quite accomplished, she had opened a window, called Nicolas up from the stable-door in the yard below where he was attending to the old mare, and despatched him for the Juge de Paix and the Maire, and the doctor, and the all-important brigadier. As to the unhappy Monsieur Richard, between sobs, and spasms, and swoons, it was long past noon before any rational testimony could be extracted from him.

What was quickly enough realised was this small number of facts;—Martin Prévost

had been assassinated after he was dressed, and had begun his daily occupations, consequently, between the hours of six and ten. He had been struck from behind by a heavy blunt instrument, no trace whereof could be found, and the blow had been dealt with such force that the probability was that the assassin was a man under middle age.

He had been murdered by some one entering the house from without, for the mode of entrance was discovered almost directly. At the end of the passage which divided the house, and ran from the street-door to the yard-door, there was a small room, used for putting away everything in general; and from old boots and dirty linen on the floor, to fresh-made preserves put to set in their pots on the shelves, there was a little of everything in this chambre de débarras. It had one window opening into the yard, and a door opening into the passage. This door was seldom shut, and the window was never open. But a pane of glass had been taken out, through which a man's hand and arm could be introduced, and the window had been opened, for it was left open, and what was more, the iron bar and hasp, rusty, and liable to creak if suddenly turned, were rubbed all over with some filthy grease,

found to be borrowed from pots, kept by Nicolas in his tool-house for greasing cart-wheels. Through that window, then, the assassin had entered, and passing through the door into the passage, he had mounted the stairs up to Monsieur Prévost's room.

The reason of the crime was at once evident; it lay in the desire to rob. But the safe had not been broken into, as was at first supposed. The safe had been opened, and probably by old Prévost himself.

But then, the ingress of the assassin accounted for, how about his egress? Every fact successively discovered, pointed to the precise moment of the crime as somewhat before seven, for Nicolas had been ordered, the night before, by Martin Prévost himself, to be at the post-office by seven, punctually, to post some business letters, and thus gain several hours by taking advantage of what was called the night post, instead of waiting for the day post, which only went out at three. He had gone out at half-past six, and was found not to have returned much before eight. Madame Jean had gone, as she frequently did, to six o'clock mass, and, as she also frequently did, had passed from the church into the sacristy, and had a bout of conversation with the Vicaire, and she

was certain of having returned shortly after half-past seven.

In one hour, then, between half-past six and half-past seven, had the deed been done, for the house was deserted then, and young Monsieur Richard fast asleep, for he slept late at all times, and, especially since his illness, he scarcely ever woke before half-past eight or nine.

But next came the question of escape. How, at that hour, had the murderer escaped? The court-yard, being paved, yielded no trace of a footmark, but in the garden beyond there were some traces of a boot or shoe very different from any that could be matched by the foot of anybody in or around the house. These traces were lost at a hedge, then found again in a field beyond, then utterly lost on the banks of the river close to the Chôlet high road.

Nothing in all this, as the reader will see, squared the least with the notion of Prosper Morel as the murderer. Still the fact remained of his master having turned him off, and of his having been heard to threaten his master. In this, however, Monsieur Richard was at once his best and worst witness; for, though he could not deny the threat made by Prosper in his presence, yet, aided by Madame Jean, he had been the means of bringing him back

into his uncle's service, if not favour ; and Madame Jean deposed that Prosper's gratitude to all, and, above all, to his master, for giving him another chance, was loud, deep, and sincere. So said Monsieur le Curé, who had been instructed to admonish Prosper, and who had been, he said, edified by the man's behaviour on that occasion.

Notwithstanding all this, Prosper Morel was kept preventively in prison, and having no other presumable culprit under its claw, French law gave itself its habitual delight in torturing, as much as possible, the one it had caught. However, even French law has a limit to its harshness and narrow-mindedness, and without one single shadow of a proof, Prosper's detention could not last. The man's behaviour in prison was irreproachable. He was mostly silent, and absorbed in the study of a well-thumbed book of prayers. When not silent, he either sang his Breton cantiques or prayed aloud for the soul of his murdered master. None of his guardians liked him, but there were not two opinions about his innocence. Besides, to his credit be it spoken, Monsieur Richard, so soon as the first shattering effect of the crime had a little worn off, did everything in his power to come to the bûcheron's aid ; and when each succeeding examination by the Juge d'Instruction brought forth

the increased certainty of the crime having been committed by some one from without, whose identity could not by any means be brought to tally with that of the woodcutter, why, the woodcutter had to be released. So one fine day old Prosper went back to his hut, and recommenced his avocations. But so repellent was the man's nature, that the having been a victim to a false accusation did not make him interesting. His innocence was proved beyond all doubt, yet people shunned him as before, and he led a solitary life up in his woods.

The sum of ready money stolen was found, as nearly as any retrospective calculation could be made, to amount to about fifteen thousand francs—five thousand and odd hundreds in gold and silver, and the rest in notes. The numbers of all the notes had not apparently been taken, although in a little side drawer of Martin Prévost's bureau-table was found, with the date of 8th October written on it, a slip of paper on which were marked down the numbers of three 1,000-franc notes and of two 500-franc ones. Of course the necessary measures were immediately taken to stop these notes, but of the others no trace could be obtained.

Two weeks passed over, and certainly no effort was spared. Officials came from

neighbouring towns, and the Préfet of the chef-lieu du département wrote to Paris and came himself to D——, and a great stir was made ; but the mystery never allowed one corner of its veil to be lifted. There were examples of such mysteries in the judicial history of France, and the Prévost murder was destined to be a fresh one added to the list.

The person who did really create a lively and sincere interest everywhere, was poor Monsieur Richard. For many miles round he was talked of and lamented over ; and particularly when it was known how very rich he was, his neighbours fell into the habit of calling him, quite affectionately, “ce pauvre Monsieur Richard.”

Of a truth, when old Prévost’s affairs came to be looked into, it was a matter for universal surprise to see how rich he had become. He had, for the last twenty or thirty years, conducted his financial business through men who did not know or communicate with each other. But at his death the accounts of all were forthcoming, and the Chôlet notary and a Paris notary, a Paris stockbroker and a Paris banker, all produced their books, and old Prévost was found to be possessed of double and treble the property, in various securities, that had ever been supposed. Between land and

floating investments, his fortune amounted to near upon three millions five hundred thousand francs ! Bundles of railway obligations there were, for instance, on such lines as the Orleans and St. Germain, which had never been touched since their creation, and which had more than doubled.

Poor Monsieur Richard ! It certainly diminished no one's interest in him when the notary at D—— produced Martin Prévost's will, by which, subject only to one or two small charges,—such as a provision for Madame Jean, who did not need it !—he left everything he possessed to his nephew. Richard Prévost's income was not far under one hundred and seventy thousand francs a year !

"Indeed, sir," said the notary at D——, "your poor uncle was more attached to you than any one knows besides myself."

"And even you do not know what I lose in losing him," said the young man. And his last interview with his uncle seemed to have so deeply impressed him as to have almost cured him of his admiration for Mademoiselle Félicie.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOVERS.

IF the reader has not forgotten Monsieur le Vicomte's application to Martin Prévost touching the mortgage or sale of Les Grandes Bruyères, he will readily understand the singular embarrassment in which Monsieur le Vicomte found himself placed when, instead of a living money-lender he suddenly confronted the corpse of a murdered man. Things had reached a point when any retrograde steps would be likely to provoke a "scandal," as provincial news-hawkers term it; and were Félicie's marriage with Monsieur de Champmorin to be definitively broken off, she might at once resign herself to the blessings of spinsterhood, for she had few or no "extraordinary resources," as Finance Ministers, in the face of a deficit, term it, to fall back upon. Félicie had got just now her one chance in hand. She would hardly get another. How should she? She could not be taken

about to watering-places,—there was no money for that sort of thing,—and she could not even achieve a visit to Paris; for, besides the pecuniary question, she had no relation there who would take notice of her unmarried, or help her to get a husband! No; if any unlucky circumstance prevented Mademoiselle Félicie from becoming Madame de Champmorin, she would simply fall back upon her father's hands, or she would have to make a mésalliance, and even of that—frightful as it was!—what likelihood was there in such an out-of-the-way place as D——?

It was altogether a dismal look-out, and such Monsieur le Vicomte felt it to be. Of course a man, even so hard pressed as he was, could not, for decency's sake, attempt to force on the discussion of his private affairs at the moment of so shocking a catastrophe as that of old Prévost's death. So he was obliged to wait and postpone the settlement with Monsieur de Champmorin's notary, under no matter what pretext. And this was not altogether easy. In France, when a marriage is being negotiated, the two persons who are to be joined together and made one can only, till that junction be operated, be fitly described as “hostile parties.” Those who act for them pass their lives in the exercise of the cunningest strategy, and to have “out-maneuvred the

enemy" is glorious. True! it is a game of "who wins loses," for if the victory be gained the husband or wife may be lost.

Now if the Champmorin general attained to a full discovery of what had passed in the Vérancour camp, he would, undoubtedly, raise his own reputation for sharpness and address, and be confided in largely by the fathers and mothers around, but he would cost his client a well-born, strictly brought up, and very charming wife. Vérancour père knew that that consideration was a secondary one, and he did not disguise to himself the danger. Having explained, as well as he could, to his adversary that his own and his father's business had always been managed by Martin Prévost, and that after the latter's retirement from his office he had preferred his advice to that of the notary who was his official successor, Monsieur le Vicomte contrived to obtain a respite from his future son-in-law's representative, and set to work to make the most he could of old Prévost's heir.

There was no kindness, no attention, that was not shown by the inmates of the Château to poor Monsieur Richard; and, though the quality of these advances was still of a patronising sort, yet they were very soothing to the unhappy young man, and he gladly accepted them; so that, by degrees,

half his time came to be spent at the Château. He never grew to feel at home with this family, but the intercourse with them was pleasant, and took him out of himself.

With regard to Mademoiselle Félicie, there was assuredly a strange revulsion of feeling in young Prévost's heart and mind. You would have thought that she frightened him, and for the first few days of his intimacy, if such it can be called, at the Château, he almost seemed to shrink from her. Vévette, with her sweet gentle ways, her simple piety, and her instinct of consolation, attracted Richard at the outset far more than the fascinating Félicie, who had, as we know, before the recent tragedy, made such an impression upon him. But this did not last; and the nephew of the deceased usurer and that born Sœur de Charité, Vévette, were, even when taken together, no match for Monsieur de Vérancour's eldest daughter. Before three weeks were past, Monsieur Richard was hopelessly secured, manacled, and cast down enchain'd at the feet of the fair enslaver; and whilst he regarded his very adoration,—mute though it was,—as presumptuous, it would have been hard to say whether she condescended even to notice that she had inspired it.

The two sisters were very different; differing in beauty as in character and mind.

Félicie was just nineteen, her younger sister seventeen and a half. They were in every respect two nearly perfect types of French womanhood,—of those two great divisions of the female sex in France, neither of which do we Englishmen ever thoroughly understand. The elder girl was a true representative of the by far larger class, which from Diane de Poitiers down to Madame Tallien or to Madame Recamier, through all the Chevrcuses, Montespans, and Pompadours of three centuries, has borne haughtily in hand the banner of feminine courage, activity, and intelligence, and gone unloving through history. The younger one personified that infinitely rarer order of women, humble and heroic at once, who from Jeanne d'Arc to Louise de la Vallière, worship the ideal, and accept martyrdom as a fitting punishment for having loved.

There is the one characteristic common to the two classes ;—both believe love to be an evil, a thing unholy, and in the negation whereof lies true sanctity. Only, whilst the one side achieves the triumph easily, and puts heart and soul into ambition and intellectual pursuits, the other side yields to the conqueror and accepts wretchedness and death as the fitting penance for having loved. Much of all this is owing to the social constitution of France, somewhat more

to the influence of the clergy and their curious interpretation of Catholic doctrines, but most of all to the conventional and physically ascetic education of well-born women. But for the pivot round which all social relations revolve in France, and on which depend all her immoralities, and a vast deal of her intellectual greatness, you need look no further than to the condemnation of love, held to as a principle by all Frenchwomen,—by those who act up to, as well as by those who are faithless to it.

Félicie de Vérancour was the very incarnation of what is called a superior woman in France. She had latent in her all that might make one of the most famous of her kind. Self-possessed she was, proud, firm, and a slave to what she believed was duty. Such women are, in France, extolled as high-principled because they are exempt from all passion. Their worst feature is, that they do nothing save upon calculation; their best, that they really are superior to every circumstance. It is not in the power of poverty or misfortune, or even of death itself, to humble, or shake, or extinguish the spirit of a lady in France. This it is which wins for them, often wrongfully, their fame for devotedness. Nine-tenths are devoted to their high idea of themselves,—which may stand instead of a virtue. The

tenth portion is devotion itself; but the motive for the devotion is to be found in the idea of expiation. They have loved! Therefore they must expiate.

Félicie was the perfection of the modern beauty of France;—small, delicate, graceful, refined; every movement, every look, was feline; and, once in her atmosphere, you were magnetised. She occupied and attracted you incessantly, raised all your curiosity, and never for one instant satisfied it.

As to Vévette—; but she is too well known to be portrayed. All nations and all ages know her. Italy calls her Juliet, Germany Gretchen; we in England cannot name her, for she is legion; in France only is she rare, for she is out of the social groove, and lives, however innocent or pure she may happen to be, in a perpetual state of terror and humiliation at the notion of her sin.

Well! October was drawing to its close, and there seeming to be no chance of the gloomy mystery being fathomed, the Pré-vost murder had ceased to be the sole preoccupation of the public mind at D—.

The weather was magnificent for the season, and, in exchange for Monsieur de Vérancour's attention to him, Richard Pré-vost gave the Vicomte permission to shoot

over every acre of his land, of which permission the Vicomte profited to the utmost extent. Félicie's dominion over the poor young man had reached such a height that he had ceased having any over himself. He belonged to Félicie. And yet, if you had studied him well, you must have come to the conclusion that Monsieur Richard was not "in love."

One evening, towards the end of the month, Vévette was descending the little, narrow, stony path, leading from the parish church of D—— to a side entrance into the gardens of the Château. She had a prayer-book in her hand.

As she turned a corner of the old wall, and thus was completely hidden from the side of the town, some one came from behind the bushes which skirted the path towards the open country, and a voice said, almost in a whisper, "Vévette!"

The girl stopped, and turned pale, "Oh! how you frightened me, Raoul!" she said, clasping her prayer-book close upon her breast with both hands.

"Frightened you, Vévette!" was the rejoinder, in a tone of more sadness than reproach. "Alarm is not the feeling I wish to inspire, but I must speak to you, dearest; I must indeed."

Vévette trembled, and looked thoroughly

scared. "At this hour," she objected, "and so near the house. It is too dangerous ! Suppose any one should see us. Good heavens, Raoul, how did you come ? why did you come here ?"

"Vévette, dearest !" was the answer, in a gentle tone, "I came here on foot from Mollignon, across the fields, and I came here because I tell you again that I must see you. I calculated that, as this was Saturday, you would certainly be going to confession at your usual hour, and that as you came home I could meet you ; but you are coming back an hour earlier than usual, —has anything happened ?"

"Yes," replied she ; "Monsieur le Curé has been sent for to administer poor old Gayrard, the blacksmith, who is dying, and he can only be in the confessional this evening."

The young man came close to the trembling girl, and took one of her hands in his, which apparently increased her alarm tenfold. "Vévette," pleaded he, tenderly, "we have a whole hour to ourselves. You will not be expected home before six, and it has not yet struck five. Now listen to me, darling ;" and he drew closer to her side ; "there may be a certain danger in talking here, as we are now doing ; it is not likely that any one will pass this way,

which leads only from your gate to the church,—still it is within possibility; there will be no danger at all if you will come down as far as the Pavilion, and let me go in there with you.”

The girl shuddered. “Into the Pavilion, Raoul?” she exclaimed. “Why what would become of us, if——;” she hesitated. “What would happen supposing my father——”

“Where is your father?” interrupted Raoul.

“Out shooting in the woods belonging to La Grande Ferme.”

“Oh! his new friend, Monsieur Richard’s woods,” observed he with a smile. “And Félicie?”

“Félicie is at home, hard at work at the altar carpet we are to give Monsieur le Curé at All Saints’.”

“And, rely upon it, Monsieur Richard is in attendance upon her,” added the young man, with an expression of bitter disdain. “I should not be permitted to be alone with either of you for two minutes; but that bourgeois-millionnaire may pay his court at all hours.”

“For shame, Raoul,” retorted Vévette. “He has gone through such an awful trial; and besides, poor Monsieur Richard, he is of no consequence!”

During this little parley, Raoul had managed to obtain undisputed possession of Vévette's hand, and in the end he also persuaded her to come with him into what he called the Pavilion.

This was no other than a kind of garden-house, built into the wall of the old rampart. It lay immediately under the terrace on which, some days since, we saw the two sisters sitting at work, and was entered by a glass door, which opened upon a narrow path of the kitchen-garden. A small gate in the wall gave ingress from the lane into the garden, and of this gate Vévette kept the key; for it was through it she let herself out and in, when she went to the church or the presbytère. The only occasions on which Vévette or her sister ever moved about alone were these. The church and presbytère had originally been dependencies of the Château, and the small number of servants in the Vérancour household made it convenient that sometimes the young ladies should venture unattended from their own garden-gate to the sacristy-door.

In the interior of the Pavilion there were two rooms; one rather large, the other a mere dark closet, at the back, without a window.

When the pair had entered and closed the glass door, the young man threw off his hat,

and raising Vévette's hand to his lips, kissed it silently, and with a sort of grave rapture. She laid her prayer-book down.

What a handsome pair they were ! She all grace, and softness, and tenderness, and humility ; and he all fire and energy, and made, as it seemed, to protect her. Vévette was the first to speak. He appeared to have forgotten why they were there.

"Raoul," said she, "why have you forced me to come here ? What have you to say to me ?"

Holding her hand, which he took from his lips, in one of his, he, with the other arm, encircled her waist, and pressed her to him fondly. Her head just reached his chin, and as he bent down towards her, he could not choose but kiss her beautiful fair hair ; but he did so reverently.

"Don't tremble so, my own," murmured he, almost inaudibly,—for she quivered like a leaf. "You do not, you cannot fear me," and he drew her still closer to him.

Vévette was all pallor, and then again all one blush, and panting with terror and emotion. "What will become of us !" she cried ; and with a sudden, childlike impulse, she hid her face upon her lover's shoulder, and burst into tears.

Gently as a mother stills her babe did

Raoul strive to calm and pacify Vévette. "My very own," said he, when the first paroxysm was over, "if you will follow my counsels, and if you can rely upon yourself, all will come right. Only answer me two questions, Do you love me, Vévette?" and as he uttered the words, he looked at her with his whole soul in his eyes. She gave no reply in words, but as her eyes sank before his, she again hid her face on his breast, and a tremor, a kind of electric vibration, passed over her frame.

"Well, then," resumed Raoul, apparently satisfied, "will you consent to be bargained away to some man you cannot love, as your sister will be? Will you betray and destroy me, out of weakness?"

Vévette turned round and looked imploringly at her lover. "What am I to do, Raoul?" she pleaded. "Obedience to my father is my most sacred, my first duty."

"No, Vévette, it is not so," interrupted Raoul firmly. "Truth to me is now your first duty. You have given me your heart and soul, and you must be true to me, or be unworthy."

"Oh! Raoul, Raoul!" wept the agonised girl, "there is my sin; and for that sin we shall both suffer!"

"Vévette, there is your virtue, and virtue is strength. Our love can save us, but it

must be strong. We are going to be separated,"—this was uttered with a visible effort. "Don't be alarmed, my sweet one; there is no separation between those who really love. We shall be nearer to each other when I am in Paris and you here, than you and any of those who are side by side with you will be. I am not afraid of the trial, Vévette, and therefore you need not be so. My father sends me to Paris to enter the offices of the Ministre de la Marine as an unpaid clerk,—the interest of my uncle the Admiral has achieved this enviable position,—but that is merely the beginning. I have another plan. I will make my own career for myself."

"Raoul!" interrupted Vévette, aghast at her lover's boldness. "And your father!"

"My father will in the end approve, because he will be unable to help himself, for I will distinguish myself and bring fresh honour to his name. But that is all a matter of mere detail, and we have not time for it now; the one thing of importance to us is, to be sure of each other. We are very soon to be parted, darling. Will you wait for me, and will you one day be my wife?"

Vévette's look of mute despair told the entire tale of her mistaken education.

"Will you promise me," continued Raoul, compassionately, "to withstand all attempts to marry you to any one else?"

"Raoul!" exclaimed she with energy, and as though illuminated by a sudden inspiration, "I will promise you to take the veil rather than marry any one else. That I can do, and that I will do."

"Poor child!" rejoined her lover gravely; "and so work out the misery and death of both yourself and me. And this is what they call religious teaching! Now listen to me, Vévette," and he put both his arms round her.

"Hush!" whispered she, breaking from him hurriedly; "there is some one coming down the path this way; we are lost!"

"Be calm, Vévette," said Raoul, with authority; "I will hide myself there in the dark closet. Open the door directly; meet whoever it is with assurance, and try to draw them away from the Pavilion."

Vévette obeyed mechanically; took up her garden hat, opened the glass door, and found herself face to face with Richard Prévost.

"Good evening, Mademoiselle Geneviève," said he respectfully. "You are just returned from church, I see. I was going out this way, up the steep path, because I have some one to see on the Place

de l'Eglise, and it is much nearer ;" and he went towards the gate in the wall.

Raoul had the key in his pocket. He had shut it and locked it on the inside. What was to be done ? Vévette's confusion was luckily somewhat concealed by her large, overhanging straw hat, and Monsieur Richard was never supposed to be very sharp. She stammered something about the key being lost, and in fact said at last that she had lost it, and was afraid she should be scolded. "It is no matter at all," replied blandly Monsieur Richard, "we can go round. But I thought you always went that way. I thought you came just now from that gate into the Pavilion."

"I had come all the way round, but had some seeds I wanted to look for in the garden-house," she answered, trembling with fear.

"Oh ! I beg your pardon a thousand times," said Monsieur Richard humbly, "I am afraid I have disturbed you."

They went back together towards the Château, and Vévette let Monsieur Richard out by another gate, and then went into the house herself, calm externally, but internally convulsed with dread.

Had Monsieur Richard seen anything, or heard voices ? What did he guess ? What did he know ?

That evening the sisters went together to the church, and close behind the sacristy-door Vévette perceived Raoul. When they went out, Vévette followed Félicie. "All is safe," whispered a voice in her ear as she passed, and a key was put into her hand under her cloak. Félicie had seen nothing.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VICOMTE'S TROUBLES.

It was within two days of All-Saints' day, when Monsieur le Vicomte went up just after breakfast-time, to pay a visit to his new friend and protégé, as he thought him.

Madame Jean received him with affability. She had grown gracious in her demeanour towards the “son of the crusaders;” for, in the first place, the tragical death of her old master had considerably softened her, and in the next she relented towards these ci-devants,—useless and obstructive as they seemed to her,—because their conduct to her young master touched her.

She shook her head, with a sigh, in answer to Monsieur de Vérancour's inquiries at the door. “Ah!” said she, “we are none of us the same since then. We shall be a long while before we get over it; and as for poor Monsieur Richard, he really ought to be persuaded to go away for a

short time. He never was strong, but he is wasting away now. He ought to change the air. He wants change of scene, change of everything. He's in a bad way." And with another mournful shake of the head, she ushered the Vicomte into Monsieur Richard's presence.

It was not the room that had formerly been old Prévost's, nor even that immediately under it, which his nephew had been used to inhabit. It was the salon de compagnie, as provincials term it, which Monsieur Richard had caused to be arranged as a kind of study, and out of which he rarely went.

When the Vicomte entered, Richard Prévost came forward, eagerly, to meet him, and when they were seated he began the conversation. "Has the shooting been satisfactory?" he asked. "I have done my best, and have told the garde at the Grande Ferme to keep a sharp look-out; but it is hard in these parts not to share one's game with all the ne'er-do-wells of the department."

"Well, yesterday I tried the woods up there," rejoined Monsieur de Vérancour, pointing in the direction of the hill behind the town. "In the way of hares and chevreuils there's something to be done certainly."

"Ah!" remarked Richard; "in the high timber? yes; and if I dared put old Prosper Morel at your orders, you might have excellent sport. Never was there such a traqueur as that man in the world. But then, you see, I daren't trust him with a gun;—you know he was complained of in my uncle's time;—the instinct is too strong for him. We were obliged even to have his permit taken from him. I daren't give you Prosper."

"Well," answered the Vicomte, in a musing manner, "I saw the poor old fellow yesterday up in the woods yonder, and he looks to me terribly altered. I can't help thinking those few days' imprisonment, and the examinations and suspicions, and all together, were too much for him. He stares at you in such a strange way, and is more absent than ever. He has quite a moon-struck air."

"Poor man, poor man!" exclaimed Monsieur Richard. "I do not know how to compensate to him for all he went through. In my poor uncle's time he used to be down here every two days, at least; now he scarcely comes at all. Poor old Prosper!"

The conversation dropped, and it was evident that Monsieur le Vicomte had not paid Richard Prévost this matutinal visit

merely to converse about the wrongs of the Breton woodcutter. After a pause of a few seconds, he began upon the matter which was occupying all his mind. "You have perhaps not yet had time to look for the acts I hinted at the other day," said he, in the most propitiatory tone he could assume.

Richard Prévost looked as though he had dropped from the clouds. The Vicomte grew more insinuating still.

"I mean the deeds of transfer your lamented uncle had been so good as to prepare," added he, with a smile wherein the deepest sympathy was meant to be allied to the most gracious condescension. "Alas! the papers were all to have been signed on the very day on which——" And here Monsieur de Vérancour cut his narration short with an appropriate shudder.

"I remember now," replied Richard. "You allude to the papers concerning the sale of *Les Grandes Bruyères*." The Vicomte nodded assent. "I must beg for forgiveness; but I have only once had the courage to go up there again,—into that dreadful room. I have only once looked into my poor uncle's papers, and I found nothing there."

"Yes! in truth it must be dreadful;—dreadful!" rejoined Monsieur le Vicomte,

whose self-interest was waxing warm, and who hardly knew how to come to his point. "Dreadful!" shattering to the nervous system; but we must be men,—my poor Monsieur Richard! —we must be men!"

Monsieur Richard sighed. "My poor dear uncle had agreed, I think you told me, to purchase *Les Grandes Bruyères*," he began, with an apparent effort.

"For the sum of seventy thousand francs paid down," replied Monsieur de Vérancour. "They were to have been paid into my hands on the fourteenth of this month,—on the day of the murder."

Monsieur Richard turned pale, and for a moment closed his eyes. Then languidly, he drawled out the poor excuse which he had to offer. "It must seem deplorably weak to you," he said, "but to enter that room turns me sick. I have tried, and I am not equal to it. You see I have even left what had been my own room since I was a boy. I instinctively fly from all that recalls the horrible, horrible event!" Another pause. "My poor uncle, then, had almost bought the property," he added, half speaking to himself.

"Almost!" echoed Monsieur de Vérancour. "Quite! He had quite bought it. The formal engagement was taken. It was binding——"

"Not in law," interrupted Richard meekly.

"Perhaps not; but in honour," retorted Vérancour, becoming desperate.

"Let us say in friendship," suggested Monsieur Richard. "Can you,—will you confide in me as in my poor uncle, and let me know why the immediate sale of the property was so desirable?"

The Vicomte hesitated, and probably the "inward man" made a wry face; but the outward one had to make the best of it, for what else was there to do? So he told him all.

Monsieur Richard listened with the deepest, most respectful, attention to the story of which it apparently suited him to appear ignorant; and when the tale was ended, he rubbed his forehead repeatedly with his hand, and seemed a prey to some hopeless perplexity.

"So that if the property is not purchased within a given time," he began, "there might result a positive inconvenience,—a kind of obstacle,—to the establishment of Mademoiselle Félicie."

"A kind of obstacle!" echoed the Vicomte; "why, it would be ruin, my dear Monsieur,—ruin to us all; for such a parti as Monsieur de Champmorin is not to be found readily in the provinces."

Monsieur de Vérancour, like a great many people in his position, became pressing the moment he had ceased to be superficial and disdainful, and he was on the verge of becoming importunate. Now that he had been forced into confiding in Monsieur Richard, it did seem to him so tremendous a fact that a daughter of the house of Vérancour should be placed in a dilemma out of which this low-born, money-lending bourgeois could extricate her, that he thought by the mere statement of the case to overwhelm that individual and secure his services to an unlimited extent.

When the Vicomte made the hurried and vehement admission of his embarrassment, a flush stole over Monsieur Richard's cheek, and a light shot from beneath his eyelids ; but he concealed both by his hand, on which he leant.

"I could hardly have believed," he said, slowly, and with an expression of sorrow, "that any event, coming immediately after the dreadful catastrophe which has so shaken me, could give me such intense pain ; but indeed, Monsieur le Vicomte, your statement makes me miserable beyond words. Do you require me to say that my devotion to your family is without bounds ? Obscure as I am, I may be allowed to express my gratitude. Your kindness to

me since my misfortune has made me your slave. I would give my life to serve any of you." The Vicomte looked benignly upon his inferior, and seemed to accept his sacrifice with indulgence. "But," continued Richard Prévost, "it is out of my power to do anything."

"How out of your power?" retorted the Vicomte, forgetful of everything save his own needs. "Surely you can keep your uncle's engagement?"

"Perhaps at some later date," replied Monsieur Richard. "It would pain me too much to say no!—perhaps later;—perhaps when I see clear in my own affairs. You see times are bad just now;—the financial crisis lasts still, and I cannot sell. All the ready money has been carried away, as you know, by the robbery; and I am myself in difficulties, for I am concluding the arrangements for the purchase of the Châteaubréville estate; and,—to you I will avow it,—I do not know how to obtain what is wanted for the first payment, because, as I said before, all securities are so depreciated, that if I sell, I must be a heavy loser. However, later; in a month or two——"

"Good God!" exclaimed the Vicomte, rudely, "in a month or two all will be over! Unless I can get the money within

a fortnight Champmorin will be off! His notary is a sharp fellow, and will soon find out how the land really lies. And once this chance gone, where is Félicie to find a husband? I wish you would tell me!"

"Oh! Monsieur le Vicomte!" answered Richard, bowing low, "it is not for such as me to point out that;—but assuredly so accomplished a young lady, so admirable a person as Mademoiselle Félicie, and of so illustrious a race, can only have to choose."

"Bah!" retorted Monsieur de Vérancour; "no perfections are worth a centime! And in the pit of ignominy into which we have sunk, gold only is powerful. The noblesse deserts itself, the historical names sell themselves to the highest bidders, and take the mothers of their future sons from the gutter, so there be money to be got! I tell you Félicie has no chance. She must live to be a beggarly old maid, if she can't marry Champmorin!" And then Monsieur le Vicomte fell to wheedling his opponent, and called him his "dear Monsieur Richard," and expressed his conviction that he would help him out of his difficulties in consideration of the friendship they bore him.

When Monsieur de Vérancour took leave of Richard Prévost the latter had promised to try and borrow the seventy thousand

frances, but he laid stress on the word “try,” for he said the operation would be difficult.

The Vicomte was no sooner gone than Monsieur Richard opened a drawer in the table near which he was sitting, and drew out a large leather portfolio full of papers. After turning over several of them, he stopped at one, and looked at it a long while. It was the deed of sale of Les Grandes Bruyères, drawn up by old Martin Prévost.

Monsieur Richard spelt and weighed every word, and then at last took it up and examined it closely. In so doing another sheet of paper adhered to it, and from between the folds a half-open letter dropped upon the ground. When Richard Prévost had sufficiently examined the deed, he replaced it in the portfolio, then stooped, picked up the fallen letter, and was about to replace it **too**; but something in it arrested his attention, and he opened and read it; it was as follows:—

“ MY DEAR MONSIEUR PREVOST,

“ I dare not go to you, for fear my father should hear of it and have some suspicion, and my father must not know of what I am about to ask. You once told me, when I was only a boy, that if I ever needed help I must apply to you. I do so now. I am in absolute need of the sum of

two thousand francs. I have no means of getting it,—and if I do not get it, I no longer care for life ! My future, my happiness, everything hangs upon this, to you, so trifling a sum, and a week hence will be too late ! Do not let me ask in vain. I have believed in your words, I have relied upon you, I have no other resource. For the sake of the gratitude they say your mother once owed to mine, help me now.

“Yours devotedly,
“RAOUL DE MORVILLE.”

Richard grew pale and red alternately, as he read and re-read this letter, and when he saw the date, the 7th of October, he muttered to himself, “Just a week before the day ! Oh ! my God, my God ! what is this !” and crumpling the letter up in one of his hands, he sank back upon his chair, and leaned his head upon the table before him.

CHAPTER VIII.

LESS THAN A SQUIRE.

THE Morvilles belonged to a class more numerous in the west than in any other part of France;—to the class known under the denomination of *gentillâtres de campagne*. Before the Revolution these people had their use, for from them the lesser Princes of the Blood, such as *Messieurs de Condé* and *Conti*, for instance, and the Great Vassals, such as *Messieurs de Montmorency*, *Rohan*, and others of that stamp, took the more active part of their households; and their adventurous spirit, mixed with the daring of the “*cadets de famille*,” helped, from the battles of the *Ligue* to those of *La Vendée*, to give to the armies of France their reputation for recklessness and dash, and to keep up the prestige of “*la furia francese*,” acquired during the Italian invasions of Charles of Anjou.

So far, then, the pre-revolutionary existence of these small landholders has a

motive. But after '89 ! After '89 it would be hard to find any reason why they should continue to be ; yet there they are as distinct as ever from the classes both above and below them ; and having in good earnest “neither learnt nor forgotten” anything, they can scarcely be described otherwise than as a nuisance.

What remains of the historical nobility of France has,—so long as all remembrance of, or reference to history has not been wiped out,—a kind of signification. While a Court and a Government subsist, which require great dignitaries, enormously paid functionaries, men whose business it is to represent the splendour of the country,—diplomatists, for instance, whose duty it still is to communicate with foreign Courts after the fashion kept up in those Courts,—while all this yet subsists, the ancient names of France have an obvious *raison d'être*. Besides, in some cases they serve to perpetuate the traditions of elegance, refinement, good-breeding, and really gentlemanly feeling, for which France was once famous. But to what use can possibly be put the families of men who assert that their social position,—that is, their name,—prevents them from gaining money in commerce or trade, and the extreme smallness of whose means deprives them of even the

ordinary education of the middle-class in any other country at the present day? Too poor to live on a footing of equality with those whom they call their equals, too proud to associate with those whom they call “low-born,”—and who despise them,—too idle to learn, and too proud to work, they live on in their uncomfortable homes, and on their narrow resources, virtually cut off from all communication with the great currents of activity or thought, and are, perhaps, in all Europe, the most thoroughly useless class that can be imagined,—the completest representatives of all that was worst in the *Ancien Régime*.

Early in this century there lived, at about a league’s distance from D——, at a small, tumble-down kind of farm called La Morvillière, two brothers, one named Réné, the other Charles, de Morville. The elder stuck to his “dirty acres,” married, had two children,—a girl, who died, and Raoul, whom we have already seen, and who was now twenty-two. The younger, Charles, ran away from home at seventeen, was sought for in vain for several years, had made a sailor of himself, and achieved glory, by dint of hard service, and harder knocks. He was now an admiral, and had recently gained fresh distinction in China.

Although a vast distance lay, in the mind

of the Vicomte, between the “Château” and this wretched little lairdship of La Morvillière, and although the “fils des croisés” looked loftily down upon persons whose ancestors had certainly never been more than squires to crusaders or crusaders’ sons, even if they had been that, still, old Morville was a capital shot, not an unpleasant companion, and in the thinly-peopled neighbourhood of D—— he was better than nothing. At all events, he was not a bourgeois! He was not a lawyer or a banker, or an employé, or a savant. He knew nothing, and did nothing! There was always that to say in his favour. So Monsieur le Vicomte consorted with him. The two wives, who were now both dead, became very dear friends, and the two Demoiselles de Vérancour went to the same convent, at Poitiers, with Marie de Morville, for whose schooling at that venerable institution her parents contrived to find just money enough to pay. The girl was delicate, required good living and exercise, and the bad living and seclusion of the convent killed her. She went out like a lamp, and as no one around her could understand why, she was, on the whole, rather blamed than pitied.

Her mother mourned in silence over her loss, and, at the end of a couple of years,

died also. Died, not only of grieving, but because in the dull, weakening monotony of an existence carried on under such conditions as those of the Morville family, there are no reserve-forces created. Life is never replenished, and when the particular sources of vitality of one epoch have been drained, there is no general fountain of life from which to borrow the vitality required for a fresh period. There is no transformation of strength, and men and women,—but, above all, women,—die simply because they have not life enough left in them wherewith to go on living. The clock goes down, and stops.

Madame de Morville and her friend, the Vicomtesse, were no more,—it is the fittest expression for the act of their departing this life,—within a year of each other, and the void left at La Morvillière was never to be filled up. The wife had been, what she so frequently is in France, the pivot upon which everything and everybody turns. In characterising her emphatically as “wife,” I am, perhaps, wrong. One ought rather to say the housekeeper, for that is in reality her function. She rules supreme, and makes it possible, no matter how straitened are the ways and means, for the family to exist without getting into debt, and without having their embarrassments dragged before the public.

When the mistress of the house was gone, the house at La Morvillière went to wrack and ruin. Old Morville was utterly incapable of either putting or keeping order anywhere, and he flew into perpetual fits of fury at the ever-recurring evidences of disorder. He did not complain of being obliged to live chiefly on cabbage soup, but he stormed at the fact of the cabbage soup being rarely eatable. The pigs were so ill-fed that there was no fat to the bacon, and the historical food of Frenchmen in or about La Vendée came up to table little more than a vast bowlful of greenish water and yellowish grease. In the shooting season there was game, it is true, but old Morville, at sixty, was not so active as he used to be; for the house was terribly damp, and he could not afford to warm it, neither could he afford good wine to light up the fires in his own bodily system; and so he grew rheumatic and morose. There was no money to pay for anything, and the D—— tradespeople were eternally clamouring for the payment of their small bills. It was a wretched state of existence, and most wretched did old Morville find it.

As to Raoul, the real misery, however, was for him, who had never yet complained. He attained the age of twenty-two, with comparatively no education at all. But here Nature compensated for all deficiencies.

The boy's energies were so rare, his intelligence was so bright, his desire to acquire knowledge so steady and strong, that he managed to scrape together an amount of information which put him on a par with the other young men about him, whilst the difficulty with which he had acquired it made him infinitely their superior.

The Curé of D—— had taken a deep interest in Raoul from the boy's earliest childhood, and the Curé of D—— was a remarkable man,—remarkable for his profane, as well as theological, learning, for his liberal opinions, and for the uprightness of his character. He taught Raoul all he could teach him,—Latin, history, grammar, and the elements of geometry, and gave him the run of his library, which was an extensive one.

Raoul had had another patron,—a very singular one; and this was no other than Martin Prévost, who had an inexplicable fondness for the lad, and was reported to have said that if old Morville would or could do nothing for his son, he would help him whenever he required help.

The tradition in and about D—— was, that Madame de Morville had once rendered a great service to old Prévost's mother, when Madame de Morville herself was a young married woman, and Madame Prévost

an aged one, within two years of her death. Monsieur le Curé knew all about it, and it was supposed that Martin Prévost did so too. At all events, his liking for Raoul was a fact. Old Morville, so far from feeling kindly towards Martin Prévost, held his inclination for the boy to be a positive piece of presumption, and formally forbade his son ever to associate with Richard Prévost. Admiral de Morville, who was a sensible, practical man, and had rubbed off the crust of provincial prejudice, if it ever adhered to him, in his rough contact with the world, did his utmost whenever he came to La Morvillière to atone for his brother's susceptibilities and stupid mistakes, and he never failed to call upon Martin Prévost once or twice during his stay in the neighbourhood, and invariably took his nephew with him on these occasions.

But since the return of the two sisters from their convent at Poitiers, the one attraction for Raoul de Morville in D—— was the Château. The pretext was a ready one. Raoul had been devotedly attached to his dead sister. There was but one year between the two, and he was sixteen when Marie died. He himself was wont to say he should never be consoled for her loss, and that it had been a heavier blow to him even than the death of his mother. Félicie de

Vérancour was reputed to have been Marie de Morville's chosen friend, though Marie herself had seemed to have a yearning love towards little Vévette, who was but a child, and called the elder schoolfellow invariably her "petite maman."

How it all came about, who shall say? And, first, what was it? Raoul and Vévette glided into a perfect unity of heart and soul, into an identity of being, as a boat on an unknown river glides down into a whirlpool, without knowing it. They knew only of their happiness; they did not know of their love, till the fact stood revealed to them that their love was misery. Then it was too late.

No one in the Vérancour household had heeded Raoul. He had not a sou!—he was sans conséquence. Not quite so completely sans conséquence as Monsieur Richard, because Raoul was a gentleman, after all, but he was "beyond the pale" because of his poverty. His remarkable good looks, his winning ways, his intelligence, his fiery energy,—all went for nothing. It was totally impossible a "man without a sou" should be dangerous to a "well-born woman," and so no one ever adverted to the possible danger of Raoul for Vévette. As to old Morville, he never thought of his son at all, till his brother the Admiral came down to La Morvillièrc one day, and signi-

fied that “something” must be done for Raoul.

“Something! but what?” grumbled the father.

“I will take care of that,” replied the Admiral, and then propounded the famous scheme for the clerkship in the Admiralty.

This happened about the end of September, and at first there seemed small chance of the Admiral’s project ever coming to maturity. Not only did old Morville object to his son becoming an employé, but Raoul himself respectfully, but firmly, refused to consent until he should have reflected amply upon the obligations of the career opened to him. Old Morville was a fool, and his brother was neither astonished at, nor did he care much for, his refusal; but Raoul,—what made him hesitate? That the Admiral could not fathom, and, after all, as his nephew only asked for time, he gave it him, and waited. In the first days of October the Admiral returned to Paris, and it was settled that Raoul should write to him when he had made up his mind, and that he should have till the end of the month to do so.

The one thing to which Raoul de Morville did make up his mind was, that Vévette should one day be his wife. But what were the means by which to achieve this end?

CHAPTER IX.

MONSIEUR LEON.

THE great evil of that in France which is not town is, that neither is it country. All real grandeur is one, and the surging and seething and moaning and toiling of the human waves in a huge city's ocean are as terrible a sight as the upheaving of the Atlantic in a storm. Nor is the man who stands alone upon the loneliest shore more lonely than he who seeks solitude in the rush and roar of human passions in a great town. Life stirs the depths of both those seas, and both are full of sublime poetry;—but there is no poetry in a pond, and no life in a canal, for neither has any depths to be stirred. What is non-Parisian in France is not rural or agricultural, it is narrowly provincial. On a narrow, shallow scale, an imitation is sought to be produced of a gigantic model, and, like all imitations, it is a failure. It is truly as a pond to a sea, and as no real ground-swallows move it, and as no

real storm-winds lash it, it is, as a pond, lifeless, and it stagnates. Nothing but disease is to be gained by living always on the banks of a pond, and thus it is that the true provincial in France breathes only the odours of stagnation, or if he mistakes for life and activity his own attempts to ruffle the waters, he merely succeeds in stirring up mud.

It is a dreary and unwholesome existence this of small provincial towns in France. Devoid of all that elevates, it detaches man from himself;—flinging him, as it were, away into some vast interest or cause, and pinning him down to all his lower wants and instincts, paralysing his mind, drying up his heart; and,—far from guarding him from vice,—only making vice itself worse by making it more matter of fact.

If the little town of D—— had had all its houses unroofed, and their secrets laid bare by a “diabolical boiteux,” you would have shuddered to find how much more degraded the human species was there than in the larger centre of the capital itself; for you would have found all the levels much lower, and all the sins of sensuality and greed utterly unbalanced by any generous instincts or lofty aspirations.

As the collective efforts of the population

of D—— tended persistently towards the fashioning of that small place upon the approved plan of a Grande Ville, you would, had you lived there, have found a miniature copy of all the faults and absurdities of bigger cities.

There were people who did not visit other people, but who, all the same, kept a close watch over the proceedings of those other persons whom they could not visit! There was intrigue and hypocrisy and dishonesty and cunning enough to furnish the amount desired by the most despotic Court or Government in Europe a hundred years ago; a perpetual craving for "place," though there was no place higher than the dignity of Maire or Conseiller Municipal;—and a considerable sprinkling of adultery.

D——, in this its transition state of progress towards the morals and manners of a great town, had its "lion,"—a real indigenous lion, or, as the French term it, a "coq de village." This was no other than a certain Monsieur Duprez, a man of some six or seven-and-thirty, whose father had, twenty years before, been the medical practitioner of the place, and who was, by the public voice of D——, declared to have "made his fortune." Monsieur Duprez was what ladies'-maids term a wonderfully fine

man. He had bushy whiskers and red lips, curly hair and a white forehead, and there was about him a certain air of ease and good nature and jollity which drew towards him many who, “*de parti pris*,” had decided to keep aloof from him. The deceased doctor had left his son a goodly house in the principal street of D——, and, instead of selling it, the said son jauntily opined that he was rich enough to keep it, and that it was pleasant to have a home in the spot where he was born, and where, as he was graciously pleased to observe, he loved every one and every one loved him. And so Monsieur Léon used to come often to his paternal mansion, and stay there for a few weeks at a time, and it was rumoured that a strong attraction was exercised over him by the wife of the *Juge de Paix*. This lady, though his senior, and now past forty, was still undeniably handsome, and people asserted that he could not loosen the chain with which she had bound him. However, be that as it may, Monsieur Duprez came very often to D——, sent down showy articles of furniture from Paris, gave dinners now and then to the “authorities!” played billiards with the whole town, beating everybody, and at the *café* on the Market Place, opposite the *Mairie*, was the life and soul of the daily gatherings, and initiated

all D—— into the deepest mysteries of politics and finance throughout Europe. What had set the crown to this gentleman's popularity was, that, about a year before the period we are speaking of, he had sent a tolerable-looking horse, and what he styled a Tilbury, down to his house, and when he was present he drove himself out in this vehicle, and when he was absent he lent it to the Juge de Paix, who drove out his wife. This the people of D—— called an equipage, and the position of Monsieur Léon became a solid one.

One man alone would never consent to have anything to do with Monsieur Duprez, and that man was old Martin Prévost. He resisted all that amiable person's repeated attempts to captivate him, and when any of their neighbours affirmed that Monsieur Léon had made his fortune, and was a rich man, he invariably answered, "That is what we shall see some day."

Unfortunately, in the life of such small towns as D—— the attraction hardly ever eluded is the café. Business and idleness lead to it alike. Either it is the natural place of appointment for those who have affairs on hand, or it is the natural place for those to lounge in who have no employment for their hours. And so, from the notary or avoué down to the labourer, and

from the petty tradesman up to the neighbouring squire, you are pretty certain to see the entire male population of a small town and its environs send its members successively to the café,—above all, if there be but one.

Martin Prévost and his nephew, though so dissimilar in all their ways, were alike in this, that neither ever set foot in the café; and that was what could be said of no other individual in D——.

M. de Vérancour, on the other hand, would occasionally stroll in, and gratify himself with a “demi-tasse,” or it might be a “choppe,” according to the season or the time of the day at which his visit was paid. Within the last twelvemonths Raoul de Morville had taken to frequenting the café regularly; and, above all, when Monsieur Duprez was at D—— he would pass hour after hour playing billiards, or talking with “Monsieur Léon,” as he was familiarly called.

Raoul’s age, disposition, and peculiar circumstances, all combined to make him the easy dupe of a man like Duprez. Public opinion,—and no matter how small the field, a few hundred men soon constitute a public, and force those who live with them to accept the fact,—public opinion proclaimed Monsieur Léon successful. Here

was his power over Raoul. Success was necessarily young Morville's idol, for to succeed was to win Vévette.

But succeed in what? What was the particular career in which Raoul wished to succeed, or for which he was fitted? That point remained vague and undetermined in his mind, but Monsieur Léon and his "success" fascinated him. Now, those two words "*réussir*" and "*parvenir*," which have within the last fifteen years in France risen to such a terrible importance, and which, be it observed, never are associated with any distinct object,—it is never said in what a man has succeeded, or to what he is parvenu,—those two words simply mean the sudden acquirement of wealth by a lucky chance. They imply neither genius, toil, nor patience; they merely imply that, by some piece of good luck, the individual in question has acquired wealth before he was too old to enjoy it. They make the successful man interesting, because fate is supposed to have decided in his favour.

Day after day then Raoul thought more highly of Monsieur Duprez, and set all his energies to discovering how he, too, could compel fortune without loss of time. It was not that he disliked work, but that he was impatient; he would have toiled

night and day for his end, but he longed for Vévette. And so he came to question his new friend about his Golden Fleece expeditions, and Monsieur Duprez smiled and said nothing was so easy, and that really if men were not wealthy now-a-days it was that they did not care to be so. And then he invariably wound up his speech with, "Look at me; when I went to Paris ten years ago, I had but a thousand francs in my pocket. I could not sell the house here, therefore it was a dead weight. I had one thousand francs ready money,—and look at me now!" And at these words Monsieur Léon was wont to indulge in a look and gesture that seemed to say he could buy all D—— if he chose: barring old Prévost, that was the interpretation all D—— gave to the words.

Ten years! yes; but ten years was an eternity. Raoul could not wait ten years. Why, he should be thirty-two and Vévette twenty-seven. "Ten years, what an age!"

"Money is made quicker now," would reply Monsieur Léon. "With ten thousand francs in hand a man who knows what he is about may make a hundred thousand in six months and a million in a year."

What Aladdin's lamp-like visions! But

where on earth were the ten thousand francs to be got that were to be the key to them all?

By dint of listening to Monsieur Léon, however, young Morville's head got filled with ideas of the possibilities of riches; and one day, about the middle of September, Monsieur Léon imparted to his eager disciple his plans for the working of a silver mine in Mexico, and proved, to the latter's entire satisfaction, that the man who should invest two thousand francs, no more, in that incomparable scheme, would inevitably realise fifty per cent. upon his venture; for under the seal of absolute secrecy, Monsieur Léon mentioned the names of great chiefs upon the Bourse who were resolved to drive up the shares to fabulous premiums the moment the prospectus of the company appeared. Then, too, there was no saying what the future might not bring forth,—a young, active, energetic man would be required to undertake the journey to Mexico, and report on the progress of the works. It might be a journey of some danger, but the remuneration would be princely, and on his return home what might not the successful emissary aspire to!

“Only,” Monsieur Duprez would prudently add, “the repute of the enterprise

is so high amongst the few who know of it that it would be probably impossible to secure twenty shares now."

Monsieur Léon, however, had taken a sincere liking for Raoul. The young fellow's intelligence and ardour pleased him; he delighted in his ambition, and would go all lengths to serve him.

"But, my dear friend," objected he one day, "what is the use of talking in this way of shares, and silver mines, and premiums, and Mexican companies? Where, in the name of Heaven, could you get two thousand francs? Supposing that by any effort I could get you the twenty shares, could you by any witchcraft get the money?"

"Who knows?" had been Raoul's reply. "Perhaps I might find means."

This was just the period when Admiral de Morville having proposed the clerkship in the Marine Ministry to his nephew, consented to give the latter time to consider whether he accepted or not.

In the first days of October Monsieur Duprez's importance rose immensely in the public mind of D—, for he was observed to receive telegrams incessantly, sometimes two in the same day. D— was not a telegraph station, and a man on horseback had to bring the despatches from

Chôlet, an hour's ride, and his arrival was an event, and shed glory over the receiver of the missives, who was forthwith elevated to the rank of a Mirès or a Pércire.

On the 6th of the month, Monsieur Léon announced to Raoul that he could secure the shares, and that he might have one week wherein to find the money. "But," added he, "after the fifteenth it will be too late; for on the afternoon of that day I must start for Paris to undertake the settlement of various preliminary details with my friends."

Had Raoul de Morville in all his surroundings any one who cared to note the changes in his humour or his countenance, they might have marked his visible anxiety during that week. But there were none who thus cared, and during those few days he never went near the Château.

On the afternoon of the 14th of October Raoul called on Monsieur Duprez, and deposited in his hands two bank-notes of one thousand francs each. And his financial patron slapped him on the shoulder, and said his fortune was made.

Monsieur Léon left for Paris the next day, convinced in his own mind that the money came to Raoul from his uncle, for on that same morning the postman had carried to La Morvillière a registered letter

with the Paris postmark. These little details are public property in places like D——, and the successful parvenu had made up his mind as to what was in that registered letter.

"Goes halves with the nephew in his prospects of gain," muttered he to himself.
"Vieux loup de mer, va!"

CHAPTER X.

THE FEAST FOR THE DEAD.

I HAVE already said that the Curé of D—— was a remarkable man. His great superiority lay in that he was so upright in mind and so largely, unmistakably human. The great fault of all ecclesiastics, whether belonging to the Church of Rome or to other confessions, is that they confine themselves narrowly within their establishments, and ceasing to be men, become churchmen. This was precisely what the Curé of D—— did not do. He was a man among his fellow-men, feeling for them and with them, and never preaching at, or condemning, or denouncing and renouncing them, but simply striving to understand them. Neither, strong in his own faith as he was, did he ever take upon himself to help the Almighty in his work of awakening faith in others, but waited till God's grace touched them ; waited prayerfully and trustfully, but could not be brought to recognise the duty of

knocking and driving faith into people by sledge-hammer threats of damnation.

The Curé of D—— had nothing about him of the conventional Apostolic type. Nobody among his parishioners, neither the old women nor the very young ones, ever called him either an angel or a saint, but every one respected him, and all were ready to declare that he was the most thoroughly honest man that ever breathed. He was ugly and awkward, being large jointed, stout, and ungainly in his movements, and having a big round head, with a large flat face. Yet the kind, truthful expression of his ox-like grey eyes invited confidence and inspired courage. Downhearted people always went to him and came away cheered. He was of a singularly undaunted nature, loved all men, and feared nothing. When a misfortune happened to an unbeliever he was by that unbeliever's side an hour after, giving him the practical help he needed, and invariably saying that good Christians wanted him far less than bad ones. It was notorious that when Père Vincent's cow died, and left him ruined, Monsieur le Curé gave him the means of buying another out of his own purse; and as Père Vincent was an infidel and a scoffer, and the son of a father who had in '93 massacred priests, this fact scandalised the bishops,

but it caused Père Vincent to have himself baptised within the year, and to bow his head meekly before the gentle force of the Gospels. It was also notorious that in June, '48, when Monsieur le Maire, terrified almost into insanity, was nowhere to be found, the Curé had assumed his place, and distributing cartouches to the Garde Nationale and sturdy counsel to each individual man, had organised and kept up such a respectable system of defence for the little town of D——, that the various insurrectionary bands that swept through the department agreed to leave D—— unvisited, and avowed later that they were afraid of the Curé.

Well ! it is true ; that was a thing often said of our friend. Many people pretended they were afraid of him ; but those who did so were always found to be half-and-half natures, faint souls, who quailed less before darkness than before light.

Between old Prévost and the Curé there had been a sort of tacit compromise, somewhat after the fashion of that which exists in France between the Church and the State ; each, at bottom, regarding the other as a necessary evil. The Curé couldn't, for the life of him, esteem Martin Prévost, for he was far too sure of the latter's usurious exactions ; and his charity and his honesty had

bouts of hard fighting with each other over the grandson of the Swiss valet de chambre ; —for, let it be avowed, the Curé was, of the two, more honest even than charitable.

This it was which made Martin Prévost respect him. A Voltairian himself, if he had had to do with a priest who was only a priest, let what might have been his virtues, he would have got the better of him, and made his life intolerable in D— ; but the Curé met him on his own ground, and, if they had tried conclusions, would have beaten him on it, and this Martin Prévost felt, and avoided all collision with him. If the Curé stated that money must be given for some practical purpose, old Prévost gave his share without murmuring, and what was more, Madame Jean contributed hers too ; for the Curé never went about begging, and never got up “quêtes” for sentimental objects.

When Martin Prévost came to his violent end, the Curé was, as he invariably proved to be upon all emergencies, the most useful person in D—. He inspired the Maire with courage, and the Juge de Paix with good sense, and persuaded the Juge d’Instruction, who was sent from the chef-lieu du département, to refrain from committing daily acts of arbitrary folly. If it had not been for the Curé the whole town would

have been preventively imprisoned, and at the same time, if it had not been for him, the scanty traces of the direction taken by the murderer would not have been discovered. To Monsieur Richard the Curé had shown every imaginable kindness, going even the length of offering him a room at the Presbytère, if the residence in his crime-polluted, blood-stained home proved too much for him.

“C'est un fier homme que Monsieur le Curé ?”—so proclaimed Madame Jean, who in no way partook of her defunct master's Voltairianism ; preferring, however, for her own spiritual needs, the mild humdrum, gossiping, guidance of the Vicaire to the rough-handed thorough direction of his superior.

All Saints' Day had come and was past, and a finer first of November had rarely been witnessed. The sun was bright and warm, and the sky blue as in May, and all D—— had been present at High Mass, and all the womankind of D—— had attended vespers.

The church clock struck six, night was beginning to close in, and the vigils for the feast of the dead, the solemn fête of the next day, were ended. The Curé gave a last look round the sacristy to see that all was in order ; he had already allowed the Vicaire

and the sacristan to go to their respective homes; and then taking in hand an enormous key which hung with three or four others to a ponderous iron ring, he prepared to put it into the lock of the so-called choir-door, and lock from the outside the entrance which was opposite to the Presbytère. Just as the key grated in the ward he heard a voice speaking to him. "Don't shut me up, please," said the sweet, girlish voice, and a slight form, clothed in black, brushed past the Curé and crossed the threshold.

"You, my child?" exclaimed he on recognising Vévette. "Why, I didn't see you in church. I thought you had gone to St. Philibert."

"No; I did not; Félicie did. You know I always come here." These last words were said in a subdued tone, and contained an allusion to what was rather a sore point between the Curé and the Château.

In former days the Château had had two parishes; the upper or eastern parts of the estate lying within the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical authorities of D——, while the lands to the west belonged to the parish of St. Philibert. The Canon Law of France prescribing that High Mass on Sundays and feast days shall be attended by every parishioner at the church of his parish, the Vérancour family had seemingly no choice

now save to go into the town for the exercise of their religious duties ; but the little hamlet of St. Philibert had attractions for Mademoiselle Félicie, and she maintained that she had still a right to regard herself as a parishioner of St. Philibert, and at all events to take the Curé of St. Philibert for her confessor. Accordingly, the compromise hit upon tacitly by both parties was, that if the inmates of the Château attended all great ceremonies at the town church, they were free to attend all lesser ones at the church, or chapel rather, of the village. Now vespers and vigils are not strictly obligatory, and mass being over, Mademoiselle Félicie had resorted for the afternoon services to the place of worship most agreeable to her, leaving her sister, as was her wont, to hear every note of “les offices” at the church at D—.

“It is late for you to be out alone, my child,” said the Curé, as he turned the heavy key in the rusty lock of the door.

“I am not alone,” answered Vévette. “Mère Jubine’s Louison is with me,” and she pointed to the tall figure of a girl who was standing at a few yards from them, close to the trunk of a sycamore.

By the dim rays of the lantern that he carried in his hand you could see an expression of displeasure pass over the rugged

features of the Curé. "She is not a fitting person to accompany you," observed he in a loud whisper.

"Oh ! Monsieur le Curé," rejoined Vévette, half reproachfully, "you must not be hard upon her ; she is really a very good girl ; and, besides, if she had not promised to come back with me, I could not have come at all."

"No ! of course not," retorted he, "so long as Mademoiselle Félicie indulges in particular fancies for this or that chapel, or this or that minister of God."

"Ah ! Monsieur le Curé," interrupted Vévette, "now you are hard upon Félicie."

"I hope I am not hard upon any one," said the Curé ; "but I am anxious to see the worship of the Almighty kept pure from all unworthy personal considerations ; and, for instance, my child, I do hope that if death,—or the Bishop,—should remove me from D——, you will be to my successor, as your parish priest, all you have been to me, even should he happen to be the reverse of whatever you may choose to think pleasant or agreeable. Where are we tending ?" he added, after a moment's pause, and walking on a step or two, "with all these littlenesses, and caprices, and hypocrisies ? The love of God and the fear of God are disappearing

from human hearts, and in their place we have new-fangled practices, pet-prayers, and medals ! Medals ! ” he repeated in a singular tone of deprecation. “ Forms ! forms ! imitation piety ! ”

Vévette smiled, and said with a touch of raillery in her sweet voice, “ Well ! what you say is always the exact reverse of what the Abbé Leroy says.” The Curé of St. Philibert usually went by his own name, whilst the parish priest of D—— was emphatically “ Monsieur le Curé ” for ten miles round. “ The Abbé Leroy insists upon it that we can never bind ourselves down by too many forms.”

“ The Abbé Leroy is a Jesuit,” broke in the Curé, abruptly. “ They don’t know where they are leading the Church, nor how they are falsifying her teachings. However, faith and prayer are our only arms ;—and hard work,” he added; “ the incessant labour to bring all our brethren to see the truth, and love it. My poor little lamb ! don’t let yourself be be-medalled. Love God, and strive beyond your strength to act uprightly and honestly ; to do what is right. All the medals in the world won’t help you as much as that will.”

Thus saying, they reached the threshold of the Presbytère, the door of which was opened by a stern-featured woman,

long past the canonic age,* and familiar to D—— as “Monsieur le Curé’s Lise.”

“I’ve been drawn into preaching,” observed the Curé, with a shake of the head; “a dangerous habit!—leads to intolerance, and to judging one’s neighbours. Here, dear child, take this box of dragées;† they come from the christening of this morning;—Pierre Campion’s little girl, you know;”—and he tendered to Vévette a round box which he extracted from the deep pockets of his wide soutane.

“Nay,” objected Vévette, “not all,—give me half.”

“Give the other half to Mademoiselle Félicie from me; in her peculiar parlance she will tell you she adores dragées,”—the Curé made a wry face as he uttered the words; “and make haste home now, for look at those masses of cloud to the west; we shall have rain in no time; and just feel how cold the wind has grown. All our fine days are over.”

Vévette hurried down the steep path with her companion, not knowing why the Curé’s parting words had struck her with a sudden

* No priest is allowed in France to be served by a woman under forty.

† The poorest person, upon the occasion of a christening, presents the officiating priest with a box of dragées (sugared almonds).

chill. It seemed to her as though all her fine days were at an end.

And sure enough the weather did change, and wind and rain howled and pelted all the night, and the morning rose upon as gloomy a “jour des morts” as any inhabitant of D—— cared to remember. At a little after nine the tolling of the church bell apprised the population that mass for the souls of the dead would soon be chanted, and from almost every house or shop-door you saw individuals of both sexes and all ages issuing; for whatever the religious opinions of Frenchmen or women, this is a fête from which they are rarely absent. The bell tolled on for more than half an hour, till, at ten o’clock, it ceased, marking the moment when High Mass began.

The church of D—— was, like many of those in the west of France, built at various periods; destroyed during the barbarous wars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,—for which destruction we English had a good deal to answer,—and re-constructed according to the style of the epoch following those troubles. It had a crypt, which with a part of the wall at the back of the choir was of the tenth century, the nave was of the fifteenth, and the chief entrance, with its pointed Gothic arch and rich stone carvings, bore the date of 1508. Inside it

was very plain, but possessed a few objects of local interest,—one handsome tomb of a princess of the House of Anjou; another, quite modern, of a distinguished Polish exile; and several partially-filled windows of extremely fine old stained-glass. The Revolution had committed great havoc here, and vast spaces of dull lead-coloured panes intervened between the rescued portions of colour, gorgeous as the richest tissues of the East, and quite sufficient, when the sun blazed upon them in midsummer, to throw a carpet of red, blue, and gold upon the stone pavement of the aisles.

There was no brightening ray, however, to enliven the church on this 2nd of November. All was dismal as the occasion itself. The altar was hung with black, and dimly lighted, and in the centre of the nave rose a large, heavy-looking edifice draped in black cloth, covered with silver flames, surmounted with black and white plumes, and surrounded with tall, great tapers, the yellow wax wherefrom guttered down in the draughts of air that entered through every opening. At a little after nine you began to hear the sharp sound of sabots upon the floor. They came in one by one; the closing door gave a muffled slam, the ring of an umbrella dropping upon the pavement produced a metallic sound,

the wooden heels tapped against the stone, a half-drenched, poorly-dressed peasant made his, or her, way up to the wooden benches, and all was again still. Till just before mass was commenced only the very devout were visible, and these were mostly country people,—what in France are called cultivateurs,—and their families. During the procession round the church, there were few of the townsfolk, but all who were present followed the procession, and joined in the ghostly chants which the ritual of Rome prescribes for this part of the ceremony. One of the earliest of these assistants was the woodcutter, Prosper Morel, and though he came the very last in the line following the banner and the priests, he seemed foremost of all in the fervour of spirit with which he joined the ardent invocations of the Church. His coarse, much patched, and darned blouse was wet through, for apparently he had no umbrella, and a broad-brimmed grey hat was crushed between his two horny hands, which he held clasped together on his breast, and in an attitude of agonised entreaty. With head high uplifted, and eyes staring, as it were, through the very roof above him, the uncouth-looking Breton poured forth the ever-recurring “*Libera me*” with tremendous force, and in a

strangely funereal tone. When the procession was ended, Prosper retired to a vacant corner close to a lateral door right opposite the pulpit, and knelt down upon the pavement, seemingly having no place upon any of the wooden benches.

Somewhat before ten o'clock the real congregation began to pour in, and Monsieur le Maire took his place in the carved oak state-pew in front of the pulpit, where, on worm-eaten old chairs, covered with moth-eaten red velvet, the notables and worthies of the parish were entitled to sit. M. de Vérancour and Richard Prévost, by reason of their importance in the parochial administration, sat there also. In the centre of the church were ranged the various heads of the society of D—, chiefly remarkable from the different degrees of richness of their respective prie-dieux. There were the doctor and his mother, wife, and children, and the notary with his wife, and the schoolmaster, and the hotel-keeper, and the Juge de Paix, with his wife and a lanky boy. The Juge de Paix, who was a "philosophe," was remarkable for never kneeling; he went to church because that was fitting in his position, but he stood when others knelt, and thought that this conciliated personal independence with respect for the forms honoured by the State.

When the Curé mounted the altar-steps and began to recite the "Introito," there was not a person of any note in the town absent from the church. Madame Jean, in very handsome mourning, had, on the whole, the finest *prie-dieu* of all,—tapestry-work, red poppies, blue corn-flowers, and a white cross in the middle. The brigadier de gendarmerie was splendidly got up.

When the terrible chant of the "Dies Iræ" wailed and moaned through the church, many a head was bowed down, and although nothing could exceed the discordance of the sounds on which the awful words were borne, and although the drone of the serpent, out of tune and out of time, and confided to the musical aptitudes of a fanatical cobbler, verged upon the ridiculous, nothing seemed felt but the dread of the future and the grief for the lost. Poor little Vévette was observed to sob bitterly as she hid her head in her handkerchief, and both old Morville and his son Raoul covered their faces with their hats. Richard Prévost was pale, and looked ill, and old Prosper, still on his knees in his corner, was intent upon his large-beaded rosary, and mumbled over it like one of the cripples in his own province on his way to a "pardon."

When the Gospel had been read, the

Curé ascended the pulpit, and, as it is the custom in country churches, prepared to address a few words to his hearers upon the special import of the day's service.

The Curé was no orator, and he knew it, and never attempted to make elaborate discourses, which, had they been the finest in the world, would have been lost upon his hearers. His sermons were generally short and to the point, and merely aimed at impressing his auditory with the reality and comprehensibility of the Christian doctrine, and at bringing home to their minds the true sense of whatever might be the particular lesson of the day.

His subject on this 2nd of November was already found;—it was death. Few among us who have passed their childhood do not respond to the melancholy of that theme! And so the congregation of the church of D—— listened to the Curé's homely words with rapt attention, and dwelt anew in anguish upon the beloved who were for ever gone.

“For ever!” There was the mystery—the terror or the hope; and there, of course, the priest, full of faith, strove to bring over every individual listener to grasp, as it were, with his hand the reasons for believing. Stifled sobs and low wailings answered his appeal, and no eloquence was needed to

touch even the most rugged hearts on this one point where all had suffered. The howling of the wind without, and the plashing of the rain, made a gloomy accompaniment to the scene.

When his short address was nearly ended, the Curé paused, and then in a few sentences adverted to the horrible crime by which the hitherto peaceful town had been affrighted,—the murder of Martin Prévost. “We have not only felt the grief and the sorrow of death,” said he, “but the terror of death has visited us;—death in its most dreadful form, the form of murder! And the murderer is unpunished, unsuspected!”

And then, leaning forwards upon the cushion in front of the pulpit, and speaking more slowly than before, he thus continued his discourse:—“I would wish you all,” said he with extreme earnestness, “to study the last words of to-day’s Gospel, for you will see how they apply to the terrible mystery which so shocks us all.” Placing his finger upon the page of the book open before him—“Listen!” he added; “‘For the hour will come in which all who are in their tombs will hear the voice of the Son of God. And those who have acted righteously will arise, and theirs shall be the resurrection to life; and those who have done evil will also arise, but only to be

judged.' Now, my brethren, these are not vain words ; these are facts. It is good you should look upon them as such. We are regretful at this moment that the evil-doer should have escaped, for his escape might have called down wrong and misery upon the innocent, and it is God's mercy alone which has allowed it to be clearly proved that among our neighbours stands no murderer : but, my brethren, the evil-doer has not escaped ; it is but a reprieve ;—it is only for a few months, or weeks, or days. He cannot escape, my brethren ; no one can escape ; for when that hour of which we are told strikes, the murderer will rise, but by his side will be the man he murdered ! Perhaps even now he is trying to forget, perhaps he has forgotten ; but the hour will come,—come as surely as that I am standing here,—and when he gets out of his grave he will see over again what he hoped never to see more. He will see the blood-stained head and face ; and the eyes, whose death-glare he did not see, will stare at him, and Martin Prévost will clutch his hand and lead him up to the eternal tribunal. They will stand there together face to face."

These words, whereby the Curé had merely intended to impress on his hearers the certainty of retribution, and the matter-of-fact truth of Gospel teachings, seemed

to have struck a strange terror into the entire congregation. The remainder of mass was attended to in silence, and the departing crowd exchanged silent greetings on the threshold of the church. The wind still howled pitifully, and the rain beat against the windows, and the lowering grey sky looked like a pall.

When the last parishioner had departed, Raoul de Morville left his father's side and went back into the church to fetch the prayer-book he had mislaid upon his chair. "Why, Prosper, what's the matter?" he exclaimed, as, on turning round to go out by the side-door, he saw the woodcutter still on his knees, with his rosary in his hand, but motionless. The man's head was thrown back, and rested upon the stone carvings of the holy-water font; his eyes were wide open, and so was his mouth; but nor look nor breath nor sound came from either. His fingers were closed tightly over his beads. He was apparently in a trance or a fit.

Raoul shook him, and threw water from the font over him, but he was some minutes before he recalled him to himself. When consciousness did return, he shrank from Raoul as from a reptile, gathered himself up, and, quivering with fear, fixed his dull, scared look upon Raoul with an expression of horror quite indescribable.

The beadle came by to see that no one lingered in the church, and young Morville recommended the Breton to his care.

In the end Prosper consented to rise and make his way out of the church, but he went alone, fiercely resenting any attempts to lead him out with an inarticulate groan, and with a look that at once was full of hatred and terror. The beadle shrugged his shoulders. “The old fellow’s head never was good for much,” he mumbled; “and what with the murder and his own imprisonment, it’s all topsy-turvy now,—*il a déménagé, pauvre bonhomme!*” and the beadle tapped his forehead with his fat forefinger.

CHAPTER XI.

MADÉMOISELLE FÉLICIE'S HUSBAND.

THE “fortnight” which Monsieur de Véran-cour had begged from De Champmorin’s notary was past, and another week added to it, and still there was no news of the money, and the suspense endured by the unfortunate Vicomte was becoming intolerable; and various slight signs were here and there appearing of Mademoiselle Félicie’s matrimonial defeat being likely to stand revealed to the general public. It was really beyond bearing! And the worst of it was, that it was impossible not to be grateful to poor, good, patiently-toiling Monsieur Richard for the manifest trouble he was taking. He never totally deprived the sorely perplexed father of hope, never announced to him the failure of his negotiations, or put himself in the position of a man who had done his utmost and could do no more; but, on the contrary, played with his solicitor after the most tantalising

fashion, and was for ever showing him a chance of the attainment of their ends. Their ends!—for of his zeal in the cause of the family, Monsieur Richard left no doubt. And the Vicomte felt it was the “family,” the house of Vérancour, which was being served;—and that was as it should be. It would have been presumptuous in Monsieur Richard to have tried to render a service to the Vicomte, out of personal friendship; whereas, besides being convenient, it was creditable to a man like Richard Prévost to wish so ardently to serve the interests of an illustrious race. And from the point of view of “ma maison,” as Monsieur le Vicomte would perpetually repeat to himself, it was gratifying to observe the plebeian’s devotion, while it did away with the necessity for any personal gratitude, which was also pleasing.

Such was Monsieur Richard’s desire to obtain for his noble patron the sum required for the establishment of Mademoiselle Félicie, that he was for ever acquainting him with some new plan that his untiring ingenuity had devised, and that must be certain to succeed;—only just in the teeth of this “certainty,” something of the most impossible kind invariably occurred which dashed all the seemingly so well-founded

hopes to the ground. There was only one simple operation that Monsieur Richard never proposed ; and that was to dispose of any securities of his own at a great loss, and bring the proceeds to the Vicomte. No ! it was always a question of "raising" the money from some one else, and in this transaction Monsieur Richard was doomed to perpetual disappointment. As to buying the "Grandes Bruyères," as his uncle had been ready to do, that was utterly out of the question. Monsieur Richard had no ready money ; everything was absorbed by this purchase of the Châteaubréville estate.

"It is a very heavy responsibility," said Monsieur Richard, one evening when he was sitting with the family at the Château, round the smouldering fire, "a very heavy responsibility ;" and he sighed, and ventured to take up Vévette's scissors from the table and examine them attentively.

Monsieur de Vérancour placed his two hands on his knees, bending forwards, and looking intently at the toes of his thick boots. "Well !" rejoined he, with a kind of grunt, "I confess it passes me to make out why you have done it. I should call it a terrible imprudence. To go and saddle yourself with land,—with a very considerable landed property indeed!—when nothing

obliges you to do so. I confess that goes beyond me ; ” and the Vicomte threw himself back in his chair as if he gave the problem up in despair. “ That we,” continued he, after a momentary pause, “ should go on impoverishing ourselves to keep up old historic memories, and prevent the glorious sound of old names from being lost in the horrid roar of Revolutions,—that is comprehensible ; it is one of the many sacrifices to which our noblesse obliges us. And how many are there of us who can do it, even ? Not one in a hundred. We, who are identical with the soil, we are forced to sell it.”

“ Perhaps,” suggested timidly Monsieur Richard, “ perhaps that is why we buy it.”

But the Vicomte did not seem at all impressed by the force of this argument ; for, unheeding the interruption, he continued, “ You people of the new school, you nouveaux riches, are so completely free ! Nothing trammels or binds you. You can absolutely do whatever you choose ; you have nothing to keep up—no traditions, no names, no ancestors who have a right to expect from you the sacrifice of all mere worldly advantages to the respect for their dignity. We are trammelled, fettered, chained down on all sides, whilst you are free as air. And yet you are

always seeking to forge some chain for yourselves. Land, forsooth ! land ! that it is with which you nouveaux riches are always burdening yourselves."

"It is possible," edged in meekly Monsieur Richard, "that we may wish to found something."

"Found what?" exclaimed the Vicomte, with truly superb disdain. "It takes ages to found an order in the state. Nobody founded us. We were ! What was the use of putting us down ? Found, indeed ! I should like to know what the men of to-day, the men without names, can found ?"

"Not an old nobility, certainly," replied Monsieur Richard gently, and with a smile, "but perhaps a new aristocracy."

"Whew !" half whistled Monsieur de Vérancour, with a supremely contemptuous curl of the lip. "That takes four generations at least, and heaps of money !" And, getting up and standing with his back to the fire, he continued, "Why, now, look at what you're doing. When you've bought and paid for the Châteaubréville property, you'll have to put it in order, and restore the house,—it's shockingly out of repair,—and furnish it."

"There's a great deal of splendid old furniture in it," interrupted Richard Prévost.

"Yes ; but old—very old," retorted the

Vicomte ; “out of keeping with the habits of modern——” he seemed at a loss for a proper term, “of modern——” he hesitated again.

“ You mean out of keeping with the habits of la petite bourgeoisie,” said Richard, coming to his assistance. “ But, Monsieur le Vicomte,” added he, “ I intend to furnish, and I hope keep up Château-bréville on a scale not quite unfitting the importance of the place.”

“ The deuce you do, my dear fellow. Why, then, you’ll not be able to do it under a hundred thousand francs a year.”

“ I do not count upon doing it for so little,” answered humbly Monsieur Richard.

“ Peste ! ” ejaculated Monsieur de Vérancour, and the look which accompanied the expression seemed to say, “ Where have these canaille stolen all this gold ? ”

A hundred thousand francs of income ! Oh, the magic of those few words ! Mademoiselle Félicie let her tapestry drop upon her lap, and surveyed poor Monsieur Richard from under her eyelids with such a strange look, but a gracious one decidedly.

“ Diable ! ” pursued the Vicomte. “ Well, then, you may make a marriage,—a good marriage ; it will be in your power to marry a well-born girl without a fortune.”

"If you would help—would guide me," murmured Richard.

"I know of none such," retorted the Vicomte haughtily; "but I know that in Paris, for instance, there are plenty of reduced families who will give their daughters to anybody who is rich. It is quite a thing of the present day, quite a new thing in France. It has been for nearly two centuries the practice to renovate the lustre of ancient names by marrying the eldest sons of illustrious houses to large fortunes embodied in base-born girls. There you have the "*savonnette à vilain*" of the Regency and of Louis XV., but it is only recently that nobly-born girls have been sacrificed to become the mothers of shopkeepers. However, so it is now, and certain it is that money can do anything. Therefore, my dear Monsieur Richard, as I said before, if you have a hundred thousand francs a year to spend, I do not see why you should not marry a wife whom the ladies of the province should visit."

Monsieur Richard bowed low and deferentially, as though he felt the full value of the announcement made to him, and nothing in his manner indicated that he was other than flattered by the Vicomte's behaviour; for, in truth, the Vicomte meant to be particularly kind, affable, and con-

descending, patronising, nay,—even paternal.

Mademoiselle Félicie, by reason of the thirty years' difference of age between herself and her father, saw things in a slightly different light, and was just capable of understanding that Monsieur Richard might be anything but flattered by her parent's naïvely contemptuous familiarity; and when their visitor rose to go, she proceeded to a small side-table in the half-lighted drawing-room and asked him if he would not take a glass of eau sucrée. Upon his acceptance of that favour, she mixed the harmless beverage for him herself, tendered it to him, and as she did so, allowed her white hand unconsciously to touch his, lingered for a few seconds ere she relinquished her hold upon the glass, and with a perfectly angelic look asked Monsieur Richard if he were quite sure there was sugar enough in the water.

And then another week went by, and it seemed somehow or other to be becoming known that Mademoiselle Félicie would not marry Monsieur de Champmorin. How it had transpired no one could say; but it was thought to be traceable to the Champmorin notary, who in moments of effusion and confidential talk with trusted friends, had discoursed upon the impossibility of

girls marrying without money, and had unguardedly alluded to his client as “much to be pitied”—insinuating, as it were, that Mademoiselle Félicie,—having been fallen in love with, unprovided as she was with any dot,—could not be held altogether blameless.

Richard Prévost abstained for three days from going near the Château. On the fourth Monsieur de Vérancour sought him. Monsieur Richard was warming himself before a huge, blazing fire in his study, when a loud ring was heard at the door bell, a loud footstep quickly followed it in the hall, and dispensing with Madame Jean’s attendance, Monsieur le Vicomte opened the door for himself, and stalked into the room.

“Well, there it is at last!” he exclaimed, throwing himself into a chair and letting his brown felt hat drop on the floor beside him. “I always thought it would come to this with all these confounded delays; and now there it is! S—— mille tonnerres de Dieu!” And all those good principles which were to keep this “right-thinking” fils des croisés from swearing, flew to the winds, and he indulged in the comfort of a string of oaths, as if he had been no more than one of those long-forgotten Saulnier forefathers of his, picking up salt in the Breton marshes.

"I beseech of you," entreated Monsieur Richard, rising, "do not give up hope. I have, on the contrary, good news. I should have gone to see you last evening if the weather had not been so bad and my cough troublesome, but I was going down to the Château now. I have a letter from an old friend of my poor uncle's in Nantes, and I am positively not without hopes that perhaps even a sale of *Les Grandes Bruyères* might be possible. Here, I will read you the letter. I got it yesterday." And Monsieur Richard began busily throwing over the letters and papers before him.

"The devil take your letter!" stormed the Vicomte; "what do all the letters in the world matter now? Why Champmorin refuses!" And striding up to the table, Monsieur de Vérancour brought his hand down upon it with a heavy thump, and the two men looked each other in the face.

"Re—fu—ses!" stammered out Richard Prévost. "Oh! Monsieur le Vicomte, I am constrained to say I cannot master the sense of those words. Monsieur de Champmorin refuses the honour of being the husband of Mademoiselle de Vérancour!"

The exasperated parent was somewhat mollified at sight of Monsieur Richard's indignation. "Read that," said he, handing over to him a letter.

Monsieur Richard did read, and was seemingly overpowered by what he read, for his countenance was thoroughly what his countrymen term “bouleversé” when he returned the paper to its owner.

“ You will admit,” observed the latter, “ that nothing is left for me to do. It is as complete a congé as can well be given, and, moreover, couched in such respectful and mournful terms that probably public opinion would expect me to condole with the writer.”

Richard Prévost took the letter back into his hand, pored over it anew, and then replied with an air and in a tone of supreme depression.

“ No ! ” he sighed, as though vanquished by fate, “ there is nothing left to do,—nothing ! ”

Monsieur de Vérancour sprang from his seat, and paced up and down the room. “ Nothing ! ” echoed he, with stentorian lungs ; “ that is exactly what drives me mad ! I feel ready to shoot myself because I have no earthly pretext for shooting Champmorin ! ”

“ Good God ! ” exclaimed Richard Prévost in a tone of downright agony, “ to think of such a thing ! A demoiselle de Vérancour refused by a mere country gentleman ! Refused ! Such a person as Mademoiselle

Félicie!—such birth and position!—such a name!"

The Vicomte went on pacing up and down and muttering, and Monsieur Richard went on watching him without being noticed.

"One thing must at all events be seen to," ejaculated Richard, as though struck by a sudden inspiration. "The whole must be kept secret; it must never be known that——"

"Not known!" thundered the Vicomte. "Well, my good sir, one sees what it is to live out of the world as you do! Why, it is known already. Everybody knows it. It was known before it was true! These things always are!"

"So that," groaned Monsieur Richard, "it will be public throughout the province that Mademoiselle Félicie—Ma-de-moi-selle Félicie,"—and he dwelt on every syllable solemnly,— "has been given up, discarded, refused! It is too dreadful!" "Can nothing be done?" recommenced Monsieur Richard, with a kind of timid eagerness, after a silence of a few moments.

"What?" rejoined Monsieur de Véران-cour.

"Indeed, it is hard to say," rejoined the other sadly; "but surely it would be possible to find some remedy. Anything would be preferable to the present position."

"I should think it would, indeed!" retorted bitterly Monsieur de Vérancour.

"Well, but—" suggested hesitatingly Monsieur Richard, "could no other parti be found?"

"Where?" cried the Vicomte. "Do you fancy, my worthy Monsieur Richard, that husbands for discarded young ladies are to be found by beating the woods for them, and that they come as snakes do when they smell the catcher's pot of boiling milk?* No, thank you! No dot, no husband! Where is there one anywhere round? Look through the department. Why, there's not even an old invalid, wanting a nurse,—not even a mésalliance to be got!"

Monsieur Richard fell to musing, and the Vicomte went on walking up and down, but he did seem comforted by the talk he was having. "Monsieur le Vicomte," at length said, in a low and unsteady tone, Richard Prévost; "there is a mésalliance, if Mademoiselle Félicie would consent to that. I know of one—a very—an extremely rich parti."

"The devil you do!" broke in Monsieur de Vérancour, stopping short in his walk. "Where is he to be found? Who is he?"

* In Poitou it is a trade to catch snakes, and the catchers attract them by boiling milk.

Richard Prévost was pale as a ghost, so pale that the edge of his eyelids seemed quite pink, as he looked hesitatingly at his interlocutor. "Well!" exclaimed the latter, "where is he? who is he?"

"It is me, myself!" gasped out Monsieur Richard, under his breath. The stare of blank astonishment with amusement mixed, with which his proposal was met, was not likely to be ever forgotten by the unlucky suitor, whose white face turned scarlet with shame.

"You?" echoed Monsieur de Vérancour. "You?" And then struggling with the strong sense of the ridiculous, "You?" he shouted a third time. The apparent fun of the thing fairly mastered him, and he roared with laughter, as he threw himself into the nearest chair and held his sides.

The Vicomte's fit of hilarity lasted long enough for Monsieur Richard to determine upon what attitude he should assume. He assumed one of injured dignity, and reminded his hearer, when he was able to attend to him, that he was exceedingly rich, and that his offer was a proof of his devotion to the house of Vérancour.

Conversation was not easy after this incident, and so the Vicomte soon prepared to take his leave. When he did so, he held out his hand to Monsieur Richard, and

spoke again to his young friend with his features not yet quit of the laugh that had convulsed them. "There shall be no rancour about it!" said he, with jovial graciousness. "I am sure you meant it well, but you know it really was too droll. I ought to apologise for laughing so immoderately, but, on my honour, it was irresistible. However I shan't forget the intention, and I assure you, you have done me good; it has been quite a distraction." And, with a good-humoured shake of the hand, he left the room and the house, and once in the street, had another laugh to himself.

Whether Monsieur de Vérancour would have altogether liked the look with which Monsieur Richard followed him when his back was turned, is another question.

CHAPTER XII.

RAOUL'S DISTRESS.

JUST before the end of October a little incident had occurred which had frightened D—— “from its propriety,” and afforded the old cronies of the place an opportunity for declaring that the end of the world was coming. It had become known that Monsieur Léon Duprez, that most magnificent “cock of the walk,” whose example, said the elders, was so disastrous for the young generation, had sailed for Australia, under a feigned name, thus escaping at once from his debtors and his admiring townsfolk, from his colleagues on various Boards, and from Madame Josephine Le Vaillant, the wife of the Juge de Paix. Naturally this was “un évènement,” and, what with one thing and another, the little town of D—— did appear to be aping its betters, and losing all right to be denominated a “quiet retreat.”

In the course of time,—that is, towards the first days of November,—what are

termed “proceedings” were taken against Monsieur Duprez’s property, and his house and furniture were to be put up for sale ; though the reports of what his debts in Paris amounted to made any price that might be reached by the disposal of his paternal estate seem a mere “drop in the ocean.”

All this really was very agitating for the public mind of D——. Here, in less than a month, had there been a murder, a financial break-up,—or, as the commentators delighted to call it, a “scandal,”—and a matrimonial alliance broken off !

In the midst of such exciting events the fact that Raoul de Morville was going up to Paris to be a clerk in the Marine Ministry, passed unnoticed. And, above all, it entered no one’s head that there could be any possible connection between his acceptance of official drudgery in a subordinate position and the ruin of the some-time “cock of the walk” who had been his intimate friend.

Old Morville spoke but little with his neighbours, but to the few whom he met he grunted out the announcement of his son’s approaching departure, and received a most humiliating meed of pity in exchange ; for, being universally disliked, pity seemed the natural vexation to inflict upon him, and he got plenty of it.

Raoul came to say good-bye to his friends at the Château, and found the Vicomte together with his two daughters.

"I'm sincerely rejoiced you came to-day instead of to-morrow," said Monsieur de Vérancour.

"I go to-morrow," interrupted Raoul.

"If you would let me finish, I meant to say that to-morrow you would have found no one here," continued the Vicomte; "for we have to drive over to the Grandes Bruyères, and shall be away the whole day, and I would not have missed seeing you for a great deal, mon garçon. I shall always feel a real interest in you, for you put us all in mind of happier times,—of the times when your mother and theirs,—pointing to his daughters,—"were both alive. I shall be heartily glad to hear of your well-doing, and of your advancement."

At the moment when Monsieur de Vérancour had mentioned the journey of the next day to the Grandes Bruyères, a glance, quick as lightning, was exchanged between Raoul and Vévette, who was seated somewhat behind her father. It was only the work of one second, for the girl lowered her eyes instantly to her work, and blushed crimson.

The leave-taking, when it came, was an affectionate one, and while the two young

ladies shook hands cordially with their parting guest, the Vicomte embraced him with genuine tenderness, and specially enjoined upon him to write to them from Paris.

It is, probably, needless to inform my readers that, the next day, only Félicie accompanied her father upon the projected excursion. Vévette discovered an excuse for remaining at home, and at home she stayed, and was virtually alone in the house. Céleste, the all-pervading functionary, was at all times too glad not to be summoned from her lawful dominions in the vast subterranean kitchens of the once grand old dwelling, and from her Vévette knew she was safe. Baptiste, the "man of all work," was absent with the carriage, and had put on his old livery to look like a coachman ; his wife, old Suzette, who was the most dangerous person of the lot, was weeding in the garden, and doing some work set out for her by her spouse in the artichoke beds. She was not to be got rid of, or eluded ; that Vévette well knew, for Suzette was a lynx-eyed old woman, and moreover her employment fixed her right opposite the pavilion. Nothing was left for it then but to receive Raoul inside the house. It was for the last time, and Vévette, after a great deal of discussion with herself, and with much of what she believed to be resistance, yielded.

Raoul waited behind some trees just outside the garden wall to the south,—in a spot which no one ever passed. About three o'clock Vévette came, and gave him a signal; he climbed the wall, followed the girl silently, and in a few seconds was alone with her in the usual sitting-room of the family.

Mute and mournful were the first greetings of the pair; but, in the midst of what was the natural grief attendant on their parting, it seemed as though some other trouble lay hidden, and each marked this in the other. As Raoul held in his the hand of the shrinking girl, "Vévette," he exclaimed bitterly, "why do you shrink from me in this way? what is it you shrink from?" Vévette cast an anxious glance around her. Raoul shook his head: "It is not that!" he said impatiently. "You are not alarmed lest we should be surprised; you know that no one will come near this room for hours; that we are perfectly safe; that there are half-a-dozen ways of escaping if one heard but a mouse stir. No; that is not it. I am not deceived by the look that you send wandering out from your eyes all around us, for I see the look that lies behind it. What is it, Vévette? what is it? Sometimes it seems to me as though there were a phantom, a dreadful something, that would always rise up between us, even when we are

man and wife.” And he tried to draw her close to him, but she still shrank and trembled. “Vévette!” he urged in a softer tone, pressing her hand in both his own. “I am going. We may not meet for months. It is the last time we can speak together, the very last time; I have but one hope, but one comfort in the world,—your love. Do you look upon your promise to me as a sacred one?”

A faint “Yes,” escaped her lips.

“Do you count upon mine to you as absolutely as though I had solemnly pledged you my faith at the altar?”

This time the girl looked up, and looked straight and unabashed into her lover’s eyes, as she answered distinctly, “Oh! that indeed I do.”

“Then, Vévette, my own love,” he rejoined, throwing his arms impetuously round her, “what can it be that you fear? For God’s sake, tell me. Do not let me go with this weight upon my heart. What is it that you dread, my wife, my surely to be wedded wife?”

“Oh! Raoul! Raoul!” cried she, burying her face in her hands, “the sin! the sin! the fault that must not be forgiven,—the sin that will never leave us!”

He partially loosened his hold of her, and whilst one arm encircled her waist, and he

sought with the other to draw her hands from her burning cheeks. "Vévette," he said, in a tone that was almost stern; "you are wanting in respect to yourself, wanting in respect to my wife, whom I have worshipped as a saint. What sin have you ever committed, Vévette? Your own scrupulousness is less pure than greater ignorance would be. I know where the fault lies;—in the teachings of your convent; in the gloomy, narrow, false, impious teachings of people who do not know that true love is bright, strong, and pure as steel or flame. Answer me, dear; is marriage an institution, sanctified by the Church? Is the marriage vow blessed? Is marriage a sacrament?"

"Of course it is," murmured she, with downcast eyes.

"And you believe that when girls give themselves away in marriage to husbands who are at least totally indifferent to them, the bond is a holy one, and the wives are blessed among women! Do you ever ask yourself, Vévette, why some wives are faithless?"

"Because they are tempted by the Evil One," said Vévette timidly.

"No, my sweet one," continued Raoul, looking tenderly at her and softly stroking her hair. "It is because they do not love

their husbands, and it is dangerous to ask from the weak creatures that we are more than is humanly possible."

"But, Raoul," hesitatingly whispered she, "it is wrong;—the Church forbids it."

"God does not forbid it," answered he, gravely. "His Word nowhere forbids it. Suppose, my own, we were married this very day, would it still be wrong that you should love me?"

Poor Vévette trembled, and blushed, and looked the very picture of distress and confusion, as she attempted to reply. "Yes, dear Raoul," stammered she, "it would always be wrong. It is a sin,—a dreadful sin,—and God will punish us. It is a dreadful sin for a woman to love her husband even, as—as—I—love you!" she faintly uttered at last.

Raoul folded her gently, almost paternally, to his breast. "Poor child!" he said in a very mournful tone; "and so, it is not the circumstances of the love, not its concealment, not the momentary untruth,—no! it is the love itself which is the sin! poor little one!" And he remained silent and thoughtful for some time, with Vévette's head lying upon his shoulder and his own head resting upon her brow.

More than an hour went by, and young Morville tried to make his future bride comprehend her duties to him and to herself,

and he succeeded in so far as that she agreed to subordinate all other considerations to her passionate devotion for him; but that the devotion itself was sinful,—that being passionate it must be so,—that remained ineradicable from poor little Vévette's creed.

"And now, Raoul," pleaded the girl in her turn, as the moment for separation came, "what is the trouble that is hanging over you?—for there is one. You have some other care besides the mere grief, deep as it is, of leaving. May I not know it?" she added, looking up imploringly at him.

A cloud darkened Raoul's countenance, he pressed his lips together, and drew a long hard breath. "No!" was his rejoinder. "I cannot share that trouble with you, Vévette."

"Then you have a trouble?" she retorted, eagerly.

"Most men have; and there are many that must be borne in solitude and silence. Some burdens may be shared by those we love; but some there are that it is not good to halve, even with one's wife." The tone in which this was spoken left no room for further intreaty, and threw a deeper chill over the final parting of the lovers than either could have anticipated.

To the sense of utter loneliness which fell upon Vévette when Raoul was gone, there

was something added which she could not define ; a sort of shadow which prevented the absolute blank. “ Had Raoul a secret ? what was it ? ” that thought occupied her.

Scarcely had he left the room through the window opening on the terrace, when a knock came at the door. Vévette started, and bade the visitor enter, with a beating heart and quivering voice. It was Mère Jubine’s Louison with a letter in her hand. She tendered it to Vévette with a curtsey, saying it was from Monsieur Richard Prévost. When opened it was found to contain another letter, addressed to Félicie, and a few lines by which the younger sister was humbly requested to deliver the enclosure to the elder. “ It concerned,” observed the writer, “ an act of charity ! ”

“ Is Monsieur Richard ill ? ” asked Vévette. The girl said she did not know, but did not think he was particularly strong in this damp weather, but that she had promised to deliver the letter. And then she went away.

Vévette in her natural simplicity and her present agitation of spirit, did perhaps think it rather odd that Monsieur Richard should send a letter to Félicie ; but what failed to strike her as strange was, that Mère Jubine’s Louison should be his messenger.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PRUDENT YOUNG LADY.

I HAVE not yet told you how very very pretty Mademoiselle Félicie was. She was not lovely ;—her sister was that ;—neither was she handsome, or beautiful. In each of these words there was something above or something beyond Mademoiselle Félicie. But she was that supremely jolie femme which a Frenchwoman alone ever is. Rather under than over the middle height, the first idea she gave you was that of perfect proportion. She had not the most beautiful throat, nor the most beautiful arm, nor hand, nor shoulder, in the world ; no one particular limb reminded you of a statue ; but the whole went together marvellously well. Each part so fitted the other, the ensemble was so harmonious, so pleasant to the eye, that you were charmed without knowing why, and would have voted to be insupportable whoever should have attempted to persuade you that you ought not to be

so. All the lines were soft and rounded in Félicie's face and figure. In her whole being there was not an angle, nor anything abrupt. She was all grace, all charm. Her voice was insinuating, her movements undulating, her looks caressing. She was precisely that kind of Frenchwoman whom, if you have the most distant dream of remaining,—however little,—your own master, you had best never meet. She never alarms and never releases you.

Her grandmother, *la belle Madame de Vérancour*, as old Martin Prévost had told his nephew, had been Félicie's perfect prototype; and, Heaven knows, her domestic career had not been one to render the position of her husband an enviable one. As a young woman of sixteen before the Revolution, she had been distinguished by one exploit only, but that one was enough. She was reputed to have beaten the famous Due de Lauzun hollow, and to have considerably helped to ruin him, whilst absolutely vanquishing his inconstancy. She went by the name of "*La Provinciale qui a roué Lauzun*," and after the great catastrophe, she carried her devastations into her own department, and, till past fifty, levied contributions of all kinds upon the male population for many leagues round. Married or single, all paid tribute; and the evil-

tongued declared that all classes were admitted alike to compete for her favour. Some went even further, and hinted that the present Vicomte was the son of a Sous-Préfet of the Empire, whom she certainly had managed to preserve from dismissal under the Restoration.

La belle Madame de Vérancour was not of a religious turn of mind. She did not even grow devout with old age, but died, it was said, in an altogether unsatisfactory manner. Her portrait, painted by Madame Lebrun, in the full costume of her palmy days of Versailles, hung in the drawing-room which the two sisters had arranged at the Château ; and when Félicie happened to be alone, she would sit intently gazing at the image, with a look that was not easily definable. Was it envy, or was it merely curiosity ?

Except for the powder which disguised the wavy chestnut hair,—that thick, naturally curling, blonde cendré hair, which Félicie dressed so exquisitely,—except for that, everything was alike in the too celebrated Lady of Vérancour and her descendant : the same calm, satin skin, with just enough of delicate colour to prevent its being pale ; the same small nose, with its transparent nostrils ; the same finely-arched eyebrows, and strangely fascinating light hazel eyes ; the same—no ! not quite the

same mouth. The epoch had set its stamp there, and Lauzun's mistress had the rich full-blossomed lips that perhaps excused something out of much that they explained ; whilst our Mademoiselle de Vérancour possessed lips so thin that they were hardly more than the edges of the mouth ; bright red lines closing over twin rows of exquisitely pearl-like teeth,—with also the one little fault that they were rather pointed, rather sharp.

That was the impress of the age. Madame de Vérancour, *la belle*, had been lavish in every possible sense. This is not the defect of modern France. One person in D—— had even been ungallant enough, —it was the Doctor, who disliked the people of the Château because they were all so healthy that they never “consulted !” —one person had replied to a remark about Félicie’s attractions :—“ Attractive, may be ; *jolie comme un ange*, may be ; but that girl’s an attorney !”

Mademoiselle Félicie did certainly give those who had dealings with her a notion that she was practical ; but then irregularity, let alone prodigality, is accounted such a sin, and to be wanting in order brings down such reproof upon a woman in the France of our day !

Hitherto Félicie’s field of action had been

a limited one, and her adversaries had been mostly female ones. Of these she had not left one unconquered; and at the convent at Poitiers she was the “pattern-girl,” the example held up by all the sisters,—excepting only the unfortunate Madame Marie Claire, who took refuge with Vévette;—and she had been pronounced dogmatically by Notre Mère as certain to be an “honour to her sex,” to be eminently wise and prudent and circumspect; strong against all sentimentality, and of an equally balanced mind. Monsieur de Vérancour, whilst congratulating himself upon having such a daughter, was not altogether without a certain feeling of inferiority when in her presence, and it had been affirmed by Céleste, who came herself under Félicie’s direct control, that he was afraid of her.

After Champmorin’s withdrawal from the projected matrimonial engagement, the Vicomte certainly did feel slightly embarrassed, and had not yet made up his mind as to the precise terms in which he should impart to his daughter that she was not likely to be married as soon as had been supposed.

She saved him all trouble on that point.

“Dear father,” she said, one evening, in the sweetest of all possible tones, and preliminarily kissing him on the forehead, with

the most touching grace—"Dear father; I know you have been annoyed,—pained,—about something that touches me and my establishment. I can guess what has happened; and though it is not customary for a young girl to mix herself up in such matters, still ours is an exceptional case, and I feel it incumbent upon me to share with you the burdens laid upon us by our position;—by the nobility of our name so sadly at war with the narrowness of our means."

"You always were an angel, Félicie," exclaimed her father, "but it is not fitting that——"

"I beg your pardon, father," interrupted she; "it is fitting that we should talk together over all this, for it is not fitting that our name should go a-begging. The daughters of illustrious houses are not constrained to the same little prudish practices as those of bourgeois origin, and where the honour of the race is at stake they must lay aside prejudice, and see what is best to be done, just as, in other ages, they would, in the absence of a garrison, have had to defend the château, arms in hand. I know poor Monsieur de Champmorin has been obliged to retire."

Monsieur de Vérancour made a movement.

"He is not to be blamed, father," resumed Félicie; "he must not be blamed; we have nothing to reproach him with, and it would be unseemly and wrong in us to bear the slightest ill-will towards him."

"I bear him no ill-will whatever," muttered the Vicomte; "but those about him have talked, and will talk, and the position is a very awkward one."

"Yes, father dear, of course," rejoined Félicie, in her very blandest tones; "of course it is next to impossible to prevent people like notaries and all that class from discussing our affairs; they will talk of us; it is their chief pastime; and,—I don't deny it,—it falls naturally very heavy upon girls like us, to be made the theme of conversation of all the vulgar little bourgeois of such a miserable bit of a place as this; but that is the fault of provincial towns; there is no other occupation save that of prying into your neighbours' concerns. If we were in Paris, instead of being in D——, we should escape all, or nearly all, the immediate effects of the disaster."

Vévette looked up from her tapestry with amazement.

"In Paris?" echoed the Vicomte. "Yes, probably so, everything passes unnoticed in Paris, as in all great centres; but what

earthly chance will there ever be of our being able to get to Paris?"

There was a pause of a few seconds, and then Félicie resumed, in a tone of discouragement, after musing for a few moments, "To be sure; it is that perpetual want of money!" and then there came another silence.

"Why is it," asked Vévette, timidly, "that so much more money seems required for two people to live upon when they marry than each would find more than sufficient if they remained single? A single man can live on very little, a single woman on less, yet, when it is a question of marrying, ten times their income appears not to be enough."

"Because, my poor child," rejoined Félicie, dogmatically, "well-born people do not marry to live, but to represent. We have to uphold our families and our names; and our duty is to take care that the children who succeed us are enabled to support their position in life with dignity. We have not yet, in spite of all Revolutions, come to such a state of things as is said to exist amongst the English, where, I believe, two individuals actually marry because they have taken some imaginary fancy for each other, and in their folly count for nothing the fortune and social standing of their

children. No! we have not yet come to that."

Monsieur de Vérancour gazed at his eldest daughter with admiration, while she propounded her theories of social economy. "All that you say is right and wise," observed he with a sigh, leaning his head upon his hand; "but unluckily it brings about one result—the levelling of everything before money. Without riches, what is to be done?"

"Yes, dear papa," answered Félicie, submissively; "you are right there, as you always are, and I can't help thinking it is wrong and unchristian-like in persons of our caste to despise money as they do"—(oh! Félicie, when do they so?)—"to look down upon riches, when riches have so often been brought to our very feet by Providence, in order that by uniting with them we should elevate the rich to our own level, and teach them to be pious and right-thinking, like us."

"Well, I can only say riches were never brought to my feet," remarked the Vicomte; "nor do I think that I can be accused of ever having scorned them."

"If I might venture, dearest father," suggested she, with her most caressing air, "though it is wandering far away from our subject, I would say that you were very

hard, quite unmerciful, the other day, to poor Monsieur Richard.” The Vicomte started, and, turning round, stared his daughter full in the face. “ You quite abashed and hurt him when he was telling you of the great fortune he had inherited, and of what he means to make of Château-bréville.”

“ No, I declare I did not,” answered stoutly Monsieur de Vérancour; “ just the contrary; I told him that if he had a hundred thousand francs a year he might actually marry a lady.”

“ Yes,” responded Félicie with the sweetest of all feline glances and accents; “ but you did not tell it him—kindly.”

“ Humph! as to that,” grunted her father, “ I don’t know how I told it him. I suppose I told it him just as I would have told it any other man of his sort.”

“ Ah! but you see, father, dear, we should be so careful of hurting the feelings of those beneath us. Men don’t think of that,—women do. Poor Monsieur Richard, you see, is somewhere about the richest man in the department, besides being the most amiable and worthy young man in the world. So perfectly right-thinking. In a year’s time he will be Monsieur de Château-bréville, with a splendid country house, and an establishment in Paris, and if,—as you advised him to do,—he should marry a well-

born woman, we shall all go and visit at Châteaubréville, and we should really treat him already as a friend."

"Well, so we do!" ejaculated the Vicomte; "don't I let him dine here with us? Treat him as a friend! Yes; but I should like to see you, who theorise so finely, treating him as an equal."

"We are taught that all men are equal," said sweetly Félicie.

"But nobody believes it," retorted the Vicomte. "Why, I should like to see the rebuff he would get from you, if he ventured to ask you to become his wife. Treat him as an equal indeed!"

"In the first place, papa," rejoined Félicie, gently, but with a shade more of firmness in her tone, "one does not make one's equal of a man merely by marrying him; when la grande Mademoiselle married Lauzun, it was out of her power to make him her equal."

"Maybe," interrupted Monsieur de Véancour; "but he made her pull off his boots all the same."

"That regards her confessor, and concerns her duties of obedience; but, I repeat it, marriage binds, but does not equalise: in the next place, I would not shrink from any sacrifice that should be needed for the good of our family—of our house."

The Vicomte sprang to his feet, and

clapping his two hands upon his breast, roared at her loudly, staring at her with all his might. "You, Félicie, you! You would marry Monsieur Richard?"

"It is Monsieur Richard who would not marry me, papa," she replied with imperceptible calmness.

"You would consent to be Madame Prévost," continued her father, unheeding all interruptions.

"Never, papa," answered she, in a milder tone, and with even more calmness than before; "but I would consent to be Madame de Châteaubréville with a hundred thousand francs of income, and to live half the year in Paris, where the title of Count would be easy to obtain."

"A pretty thing, indeed, for us," sneered the Vicomte. "A title given by Monsieur Bonaparte! Why, you would be ashamed to wear it."

"No, indeed, papa, I should not. Authority is authority always; and there is our own cousin, the Marquis de Vovray, who has let himself be made a Chamberlain,—the title means little enough for us,—but it means still the separation from those beneath, from the mass; that is the principal thing needed."

Monsieur de Véranceur was silent for some moments, and rubbed his forehead

anxiously. “Is it possible, Félicie,” he asked at last, “that you can be serious? Is it possible you can mean that you would marry Monsieur Richard?”

“Father,” she answered, steadily and slowly, “I tell you again there is no sacrifice I will not make to our position. I make it to you, I make it to Vévette.” The latter looked up suddenly with an air almost of terror. “It is my duty. We are not on earth to think of ourselves, but of others. One of my first duties is to think of Vévette. Her turn must come in a year or two.” Vévette felt herself grow cold and shudder inwardly. “And how is she to be provided for?”

“You are, indeed, a perfect heroine,” said the Vicomte, with conviction, and as though humbled at the superior virtue of his child.

“Luckily,” resumed she, giving an upward glance of thanksgiving, “I have always had my duty held up before my eyes, and, after all, duty is a thing which a well-born woman does easily.” Poor Vévette felt more than ever what a wretched sinner she was. “The difficulty in all this,” added Félicie, after a pause, “would be to bring poor Monsieur Richard to understand that he might ask for my hand.” She watched her father with a

very curious glance from under her eyelids whilst uttering these words. "It is a delicate and difficult negotiation. Perhaps the Abbé Leroy——"

Monsieur de Vérancour waved his hand. "I think," interrupted he, "it would be quite possible to make Monsieur Richard understand; but, of course, I must reflect on all this. I must take time."

"Dear father!" exclaimed the girl, "of course you must do whatever you think fit. I shall always obey."

"Oh, Félicie!" cried Vévette, throwing her arms round her sister's neck, when the Vicomte had retired for the night. "Can you? Can you?"

"A well-born woman can always do what is her duty, my dear Vévette," answered Mademoiselle Félicie, indulging in just a very little self-gratulation.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BRIDEGROOM.

TIME wore on, the winter passed over, and early in the spring Monsieur de Vérancour had been brought to regard as admissible the event which had at first appeared in his sight so enormously ridiculous;—the possible marriage of his eldest daughter with Richard Prévost.

It must not, however, be supposed that this was easily accomplished. Félicie did not find it sufficient to gain one or two isolated battles; she had a complete campaign to undertake, and her final victory was due only to her patience and consummate good generalship. She never lost her temper and never lost a point; but let what would be the insignificance of her gain of the previous day, she always contrived to add some small gain to it on the following one, so that, in the course of a month or two, by dint of clever treatment, the Vicomte got quite accustomed to his new

position, and, in the prospects of her future wealth, consented to lose sight of the fact that his daughter would become the wife of a valet de chambre's grandson. One thing was settled at the very outset, and that was, that the matter should be kept secret ; that no word of the future engagement should transpire ; and that not until Monsieur Richard had left D——, and taken rank in the department as Monsieur de Châteaubréville, should he be presumed to have aspired to the honour of Mademoiselle de Vérancour's hand.

What principally disposed the Vicomte in favour of the coming mésalliance was, that, besides the wealth of the bridegroom, the whole proceeding had about it a character of barter that was serious and satisfactory. There was nothing sentimental in the whole concern. All was business-like and full of calculation. Had the unfortunate Monsieur Richard put himself in the light of an aspiring lover, of a man who, for the sake of becoming Félicie's husband, would sacrifice every other earthly consideration in life, it is probable that the young lady herself would have crushed his hopes with withering contempt, and it is certain that on such terms the Vicomte would never have consented to accept Monsieur Richard as his son-in-law. But the

latter was wise enough to understand this, and he never once alluded to the possibility of his marriage being anything more than a business transaction. This put all parties at their ease, and made the situation clear and comprehensible. Monsieur Richard, having a very large fortune, which, situated as he was, could be of no use to him, found means, through the concession of the Vérancour family, of securing to himself a status in society, and of being admitted to spend his money among people of rank and birth. This, of course, could not be purchased at too high a rate, and, in fact, Monsieur Richard got it a vast deal too cheap. On the other hand, Mademoiselle Félicie, instead of being condemned to lead a life of single blessedness in an out-of-the-way province, with not enough to live upon decently, acquired the free disposal of an income much exceeding that of the most fashionable ladies for several miles round. This was as it should be, and there was a sense of fitness in the fact of a Vérancour enjoying a hundred thousand francs a year.

The work of renovation and embellishment at Châteaubréville went on apace, and would have been in an advanced stage of completion, had it not been for poor Monsieur Richard's health. The winter

had been extremely severe, and the unlucky young man had been a frequent sufferer. His lungs were said to be delicate, though the fact was made a matter of dispute between two rival practitioners; the old doctor at D—— declaring for the weakness of the chest, and a young doctor, lately settled at Chôlet, taking the part of "nerves," and at most only tolerating the notion of bronchial susceptibility. But then this new disciple of Æsculapius was a man who made light of everything, according to the way of the modern Parisian school. It was a wonder he believed in death,—some said he called it an accident,—and he did not promise to have any success in his provincial sphere. He treated poor Monsieur Richard somewhat severely, never called him "poor" at all, and shrugged his shoulders at those who did. He openly declared that the ailments of Monsieur Richard were only laziness and self-indulgence, and told him to his face that he would never be well till he took more exercise, lived more in the air, washed more in cold water, and eat fewer sweet-meats. He affirmed that whatever harm there was, came from the liver and the mucous membrane, and that the patient's absurd mode of life was answerable for the whole. But then this young man, Doctor

Javal by name, was of a hard and unkind nature, and did not sympathise readily with people who complained overmuch.

It is certain that Monsieur Richard's mode of living was unwholesome, but that struck no one else, for it always has been a theory in France,—in the provinces above all,—that the amount of pampering a man enjoys should be measured only by the power of paying for that whereby you are to be pampered. Therefore, Monsieur Richard, being rich, was quite right to indulge himself in every possible way,—as he did. The atmosphere he kept up in his room was that of a forcing-house, and when he went out of doors he muffled himself up into a permanent state of perspiration. He had ordered down a neat little brougham from Tours, and drove about with shut windows and a foot-warmer,—never walking save on the brightest, warmest days, and for very short distances. Warm baths he allowed himself with the approbation of the old doctor at D—, who was for ever vaunting their “cooling and calming action!” And sweetmeats he indulged in to a degree that met with the approbation of no one at all,—not even of Madame Jean, who had to make them. Altogether the winter had severely tried Monsieur Richard, and his

appearance was unhealthy, as he would sit shivering over the fire in the salon of the Château, where the inmates never attained beyond a very moderate degree of warmth.

With all this, his impatience to be in the full enjoyment of his riches seemed daily to increase in ardour. He was fretful with desire to see the house at Châteaubréville fit to be inhabited, and would sometimes avow to Mademoiselle Félicie that he counted the days and hours till he should have entered upon his new duties as head of one of the principal establishments in the department. Curiously enough, by degrees, as the state of his health became less satisfactory, fortune appeared intent upon favouring him more. An enterprise in which his uncle had invested a considerable sum, full fifteen years ago,—a copper mine in Chili, and which had been supposed to be an unlucky venture,—suddenly turned up a prize, and Monsieur Richard found himself, from day to day, far richer than he thought. It was evident now that he would enter upon his proprietorship of Châteaubréville without having to deduct from his capital the amount that the improvements there would have cost. Well, Monsieur Richard was a lucky man ! Only it was just at this identical moment

that his health gave symptoms of the greatest weakness.

“Compensation!” said the public of D——; and perhaps it was so. Perhaps it would not have been just if, in addition to his extraordinary good luck in every other respect, Monsieur Richard had had the robust health and solid nervous system of some others who have their livelihood to earn. It is a just dispensation of Providence that the possession of great joys and the power of enjoying them seldom go together; it consoles those who have only the capacity for enjoyment without anything to enjoy, and prevents them from cutting their neighbours’ throats, or their own.

But what would most have surprised any English observer, had he had occasion to examine minutely the feelings of the various persons we have introduced to him, would have been to notice the comparative absence of what is usually called “feeling” in any one of them.

Here was a father about to see one of his daughters take the gravest step that ever is taken in a woman’s life; here was a girl under twenty about to assume upon herself the responsibilities of wedlock; and here was a man about to give all his worldly advantages for the privilege of calling this girl his;—yet in all this,

where was the love;—where the sentiment, compared to which everything else is as nothing?

Monsieur de Vérancour, amongst all the objections he saw to Félicie's marriage with Richard Prévost, never adverted to the possible existence of a moral one; never so much as asked himself whether she would be happy with this man, or whether she could be pure and worthy and good;—whether, at the end of a few years of such a union the immortal part of her would be better, nobler than now, or weakened and debased. He simply did not think of anything of the kind, because no one that he ever heard of was in the habit of so doing, and because his duty was merely to place, to establish his children;—having done which, he was entitled to hold up his hand to the Almighty, like Simeon, and chant his Nunc Dimitis in all confidence. Monsieur de Vérancour was, as times go, a very excellent father; and no one in their senses would dream of demanding from him an iota more than what he was doing.

And Félicie?

Félicie was, according to the worldly morals of France, a thoroughly right-minded person,—a person upon whom you could count. This means that all the figures you take the trouble to cast up in relation

to her would be found correct; all the calculations you make would be unerring, because you never would have to fear one of those perturbations which are brought about by the ill-regulated, comet-like vagaries of a sentiment. Félicie was reliable. I will not speculate upon what a lover or even a friend might wish, but depend upon it there is not in all France a father or mother who would not be full of pride and delight if heaven sent them only such a daughter as Félicie de Vérancour.

As to Monsieur Richard, the future bridegroom of the fascinating Félicie, his nature was too thoroughly feeble a one to bear the strong tree of love; but he was possessed by an unceasing desire to call the girl his, and only refrained from manifesting it because his instinct told him that such a manifestation would be prejudicial to his interests.

One person alone, in this assemblage of eminently reasonable individuals, was unlike the rest, and that person was Vévette. She was a stray flower in this garden of pot-herbs, a wild rose upon the wall destined only to foster fruit. Such being the nature of her character and life, Vévette was not regarded by those around her as altogether safe; and, if she had not been such a very child, she would have been narrowly

watched, and made to undergo a due and proper course of training. It was tacitly understood between the Vicomte and his eldest daughter that whenever the latter became Madame de Châteaubréville, and was the sovereign mistress of her magnificent household, she should take her younger sister to live with her, and do the best she could for her advancement in life. Vévette's "turn," as she had practically expressed it, would then come, and neither Félicie nor her father had the slightest doubt of how exemplary it would be on their parts to contrive that that "turn" should be an advantageous one.

The whole of poor little Vévette's life had been of a kind to mislead her in all her appreciations of herself and of others. She had lost her mother too young to have seen, from her example, how perfect a merely loving woman, aiming at nothing loftier, could be; and she was far too humble to imagine that whatever instinctive sentiment she possessed could be otherwise than blameable. Of course, her convent education had been for her, with her peculiar disposition towards timidity and diffidence, the worst possible education. Convent discipline, the most enlightened as well as the worst, can seldom or never be good for any save the haughty and rebellious in spirit,

whom it does sometimes modify, and to whom it teaches worldly wisdom as well as the justice of concession. To the naturally meek and humble, convent discipline is simply destruction. It roots up self-reliance and preaches dependence as a virtue, and you may pretty surely predict of a convent favourite that her notions of right and wrong are not innate, but imposed upon her from without.

Now, although poor little Vévette's nature was too sweet and pure a one to be spoilt by all these mistakes of education, her peace of mind was destroyed by them, and her simplicity of heart perturbed. Whilst in reality all her own native instincts were towards the fair and the noble and the generous, she was driven into being perpetually at war with herself, and into believing that whatever she thought, or wished, or did, must be wrong. On all sides she had heard her sister lauded as the pattern of everything a woman should be, and her own inmost soul, when questioned, told her she could not be like Félicie.

It was one of the causes of her love for Raoul, that, recognising as he did the beauty of her nature, he gave her—whether she would or not—a kind of trust in herself. The great cause of the love, however, was the impossibility of avoiding

it. They were left to themselves, and they loved, just as it was natural they should do. But this was precisely one of poor Vévette's greatest troubles. From the same source whence she had drawn her piety, her faith in all divine truths, from that same source flowed a doctrine which condemned her to be incessantly at war with herself. That nature was to be vanquished, and that all love was a sin;—this was the doctrine of her teachers. And what was she to do with such teaching as this?

Instead of loving frankly and gladly, and hopefully and strongly, and finding virtue in the truth of devotion, the poor child struggled against what was best and noblest in herself; and though with her whole heart she loved Raoul, the innocence of the passion was overcast, and she was doomed to the torture of an unquiet conscience, and to what was worse still, the knowledge that far from bringing happiness to him she best loved, she, by her own uncertainties and alarms, brought him perpetual perplexity and pain.

But in this little out-of-the-way town of D—, events were in store which threatened to force the persons, we have been attempting to describe, out of their conventional parts into the real characters which had been allotted to them in the grave and serious drama of life.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BRIDE.

As the domain of Châteaubréville lay at the other side of the department, to the north-east, if you went from D—— by the road, it was a good half-day's work to get there. The usual manner of performing the journey was to drive over to one of the railway stations on the banks of the Loire, and from thence proceed by rail to the post town nearest to the château itself, whence a vehicle could be despatched to meet you.

This was Monsieur Richard's mode of proceeding, and it had now become his habit, when he went over to inspect his future residence, to pass one night always, and occasionally two or three, at the château. It took four hours of tolerably good driving, with a rest of half-an-hour at the half-way auberge, to get from D—— to the station, and another good hour and a half were required before landing you at the hall door of Châteaubréville. The expedi-

tion, therefore, was not possible in the short days of winter. But Monsieur Richard was growing very anxious that his future wife should give her opinion upon some of the interior arrangements of what was to be her home, and his anxiety would, if he had dared, have been tiresome; as it was, it was only fidgety, and he was for ever recurring to his fear lest too much delay would be engendered by the want of certain details being positively fixed upon. March was drawing to an end, and the weather had, for the last ten days, been singularly fine, the genial warmth of the sun bringing forth vegetation in what was an exceptional manner even for the soft climate of western France.

It was decided to take a journey to Monsieur Richard's new estate, but to take it in a form that should not awaken the curiosity of the inhabitants of D——. Monsieur Richard himself was to go over to Château-bréville the day before, pass the night there, and prepare everything for the reception of the Vicomte and his daughters on the morrow. The remarkable old conveyance which, in the days of the Restoration, had been a calèche, drawn by two stout percherons, was ordered out, and Baptiste, in his time-worn livery, prepared to get all the work he could out of the one aged horse

which on such like occasions had the honour of transporting the Vérancour equipage of state from place to place.

Why his master and his family were going early in the morning to the N—— station Baptiste did not guess, which was no wonder, seeing that Baptiste was not bright; but the lynx-eyed Suzette, his better half, did not guess it either, which was wonderful. So the Vicomte and the two girls really did accomplish their journey without all the gossips in D—— knowing whither they were bent, and the general opinion was that they had gone to see the Mère Supérieure of a very famous convent on the Nantes Line, in order to arrange for the noviciate of Mademoiselle Vévette, who was all but certain one day to take the veil.

The N—— station was reached, the down train duly caught, and the party safely set down at the village where Monsieur Richard was to be found in waiting. And there he was sure enough, and all four packed themselves into the vehicle he had brought for their convenience; and the big, finely gilt clock just over the vestibule door was striking one when they got out at what was one day to be Félicie's future home.

The few hours allotted to the visitors—they were forced to leave again at a little after five—were, as you will easily conceive,

amply employed by all they had to see. Félicie proved herself thoroughly equal to the duties of her future position, and inspected everything as though she had all her life been the mistress of a large house, and reigned over a numerous establishment. Nothing was beyond or beneath her; nothing, in fact, out of her competency. She dived down into the kitchens, and soared up into the attics, authoritatively decreeing what was requisite for each individual servant as long as he or she was "in the exercise of their functions" for the master's benefit, and how little was sufficient for them when they were consigned to the privacy of their own rooms. She was brilliant on the subject of pantries, larders, and store-closets, and hit upon all the dry corners in which it was best to keep provisions and linen; and in the wash-houses absolute inspiration visited her, and she overturned all the plans which had been adopted for heating the caldrons, substituting for them others which were, as she victoriously showed, far more economical. The architect who had been appointed to meet them, and who knew nothing of the names of the persons with whom he spoke, was penetrated with admiration of the wise and omniscient Félicie, and could not help repeating at every fresh defeat of his com-

binations by her suggestions—“Voilà une petite dame bien entendue !”

Poor Vévette felt, as usual, thoroughly crushed into nothing by her sister's superiority. So did the Vicomte ; but then he liked it, which Vévette did not. No true woman can bear to think of herself as femininely inferior, that is, inferior in those qualities which constitute a woman. The decision and practical ability of Félicie overawed Vévette ; and feeling that nothing could ever make her emulate her sister's virtues, she began to regard herself as useless, that is, incapable of imparting happiness ; and the inevitable consequence was discouragement and deep self-dissatisfaction. Poor Vévette ! She resolutely admired Félicie because she had been told to do so from childhood upwards, but do what she would, she felt she could not like her ways.

This visit to Châteaubréville was a sore trial for Monsieur Richard, for almost all the arrangements to which he had been consenting for four months were disputed and in most cases changed. Of course, on the alterations made in the inside of the house Monsieur Richard had never given an opinion,—he had none,—but had allowed his architect to go his own way, and the architect had aimed chiefly at two things—filling his own pockets, and giving to the

general aspect of the dwelling a sufficient air of richness. In neither of these aims did Mademoiselle Félicie at all acquiesce, and she made comparatively short work with the bourgeois-like splendour which was about to flaunt from every wall and window of the “renovated” old place.

“What on earth has made you think that the panels in this small drawing-room should be gilt?” asked she, smiling, but with at the same time an air of such exquisite impertinence that a spectator must have had a curious idea of what the husband’s life would be who would daily endure such treatment. “What is the use of gilding here?”

“It is richer,” replied both Monsieur Richard and his architect at once.

The elegant Félicie curled her lip, and used an inexpressibly disdainful accent whilst echoing the word “richer!” And she meant this as much for her own sire as for Monsieur Richard, for she could not avoid seeing that the Vicomte was every bit as unable to resist the temptation of what was gaudy as was his base-born son-in-law elect.

“Why, what would you furnish these salons with?” she continued, always imperceptibly smiling, and looking so pretty! “Would you hang them with crimson damask?”

"Crimson damask is very handsome," observed the architect, rather abashed.

"Then what is to become of your beautiful old meuble in white wood, and Beauvais tapestry, which is absolutely priceless for any connoisseur?"

"Well," ventured to remark Monsieur Richard, "Monsieur and I thought of putting that into the rooms up-stairs, and—"

But she quickly cut him short, and laid her law of elegance down, which was manifestly to be without appeal. "No one but parvenus," said she, mercilessly, though in honey-sweet tones, "ever put gilding and silk or satin stuffs into country houses. Richness, or even pomp, is all very well for a Paris residence, and in your drawing-rooms in Paris you can be as lavish of gold and crimson damask, within a certain measure, as you choose; but freshness is the notion that ought to be inspired by the aspect of a country abode. Renovate, by all means, the old boiseries of these salons, but keep them what they are; wood, plain wood, white upon pearl grey, and no gold! —for Heaven's sake, no gold!"

Monsieur Richard looked utterly disappointed, and as if half his satisfaction in his wealth were taken from him. He pleaded for just a little "show," for here

and there a patch of garish colouring or of costly material, and finding no other, he invariably made use of the same argument, and vaunted the richness of what he proposed. Against all the delicate-tinted, though perhaps a little faded, Beauvais and Gobelins furniture, which Mademoiselle de Vérancour advocated, he opposed his brand new, gorgeous tissues, of which he lugged about a huge roll of patterns. “See how rich this is!” he repeatedly said.

“But it is bad in taste!” was the only answer he got, and this answer reduced him to silence. And so it was with everything. What he had thought fair or fitting was not discussed, or superseded by something fairer or more fitting; but the standard by which he could by any possibility judge of its fittingness or fairness was not explained to him. He was put from the starting-point out of the pale of whatsoever was connected with taste!

And I don’t say that, from the artistic point of view, Mademoiselle Félicie was wrong, for I am tolerably certain that no teaching and no change of habits could ever have given Richard Prévost the fine perceptions that are requisite to be able to judge the beauty of external objects, just as probably no mere circumstance would have ever destroyed them in Félicie. But

it was a hard case, for here were this man and this woman about to enter upon a compact to exist side by side during the term of their natural lives, without one single point in their respective modes of life being otherwise than calculated to keep them morally asunder.

They went through the house, up-stairs and down-stairs, and every step made it evident how perfectly at home Félicie would be in this fine old mansion when she came to be its mistress, and how no amount of mastership would ever make of Richard Prévost anything else save an intruder. But though each, perhaps, may have instinctively felt this, neither saw in it anything which appeared like a warning, and the man was as ready as before to buy the wife who would despise him, and the wife equally ready to accept the husband with whom while she lived she could never have one single moment's community of thought.

They rambled through the gardens and shrubberies, and visited greenhouses and poultry-yards and stables, and here, as indoors, the captivating Félicie promulgated her dogmas, and put out of the question all attempt at a retort or a counter-objection by the fatal sentence: "It is not the proper thing," or "It is bad taste."

When the time came for going, Made-

moiselle Félicie was well pleased with her expedition, and when she stepped into the vehicle which was to take them back to the station, she felt that upon the whole she had spent a pleasant day. Monsieur Richard could not make up his mind as to whether the day had been altogether a pleasant one to him, and for the first time since they had met, the future father and son-in-law cherished a sort of mutual sympathy; for they had been equally snubbed by the same person.

At the N—— station who should they meet but the Curé of D——, who had been sent for by the bishop, and was returning to his parish by a late train. They made him the offer of a fifth place in the venerable old calèche, which necessitated the pitiless squeezing together of the two young ladies, but thoroughly convinced Baptiste that the object of the journey had really been the convent at which Mademoiselle Vévette would one day take the veil.

It was striking seven when they started on their homeward course, but the old horse, eager for his stables, did his best, and Baptiste affirmed that they should reach D—— before the four hours usually required would be over. The night was a warm but windy one; fitful, as the finest nights in early spring are wont to be, and

after the moon had silvered the whole road before them and the tall trees along its edge, her light would be suddenly eclipsed by the dusky veil of some swiftly drifting clouds. “We are going through your property here, are we not, Monsieur le Vicomte?” asked the Curé, as the carriage jolted out of a very ill-repaired by-way into a tolerably smooth road skirted by young woods.

“No, no; that’s none of mine,” was the reply. “I wish it were. Les Grandes Bruyères lie much higher up to the left. We have just come across old Rivière’s fields, and at this moment we are entering on Monsieur Richard’s woods.”

“A valuable property,” suggested the Curé.

“Humph!” grunted the Vicomte. “Yes, valuable enough, but atrociously ill kept, I must say.”

“What can one do?” objected Monsieur Richard. “It would be the work of an active stout-bodied man to superintend the cuttings hereabouts. I know that, and old Prosper is assuredly not fit for the post; but if I were to turn him away what would become of the old fellow? He is already in a very shaky state of health.”

“More than that even, Monsieur Richard,” replied the Curé; “the man seems to me

absolutely shattered ; he is so wasted away as to be but the shadow of himself ; and his temper is strangely gloomy."

"Have you seen him lately ?" inquired Monsieur Richard eagerly.

"Not very lately,—and you?"

"Oh ! I never see him," was the prompt rejoinder. "When he comes, he sees Madame Jean, or he goes to the notary."

"Poor old man !" said Vévette gently ; "his must be a sad life up all alone there in his woods. Was he always quite alone in the world ?"

"As long as I have known him, always," answered Monsieur Richard.

"Yes," added the Curé, "and as far as I know, he was always of the same unsociable disposition ; a born solitaire, but, after his fashion, sincerely pious."

"Poor old man !" said Vévette again.

The carriage rolled and jolted on, and the third quarter past ten was just to be heard from the church belfry as it came upon the stones at the entrance into D—. "There ends my land," said Monsieur Richard, as he pointed to a steep wooded bank just outside the town which sloped down into the road. "Up that little path you can go on to the very top of the hill and past M. Rivière's new farm."

"And straight up to old Prosper's hut,"

added the Vicomte. "I know the road well, and take it often out shooting. There's somebody coming down it now ;—just look ! It never can be old Prosper at this hour." The moon at this moment was shining very brightly, and gave plainly to view the figure of a man coming out of the little winding path into the road. He was evidently about to cross it, but was stopped by the advance of the old horse that was trotting forward under Baptiste's whip. He drew up and waited. The carriage passed, and as it did so the moonbeams fell full upon his face.

"Why, it's Raoul !" exclaimed Félicie.

"Nonsense !" said her father. "Raoul's in Paris doing his office work."

"Besides, what should he be about in the middle of the night on a lonely path leading only through my woods ?" muttered Monsieur Richard. "I don't suppose he has conferences with Prosper up in his hut."

"I don't mind that," continued Félicie ; "it was Raoul."

Vévette felt a shudder go through her whole being, without knowing what it was that affrighted her.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LITANIES FOR THE DEAD.

A FEW days went by, and it was found to have really been Raoul de Morville whom the Vérancours had seen coming down into the road on the night of their return from Châteaubréville. But the way in which this was found out was rather strange, and did not leave a very satisfactory impression. Raoul had called upon the Vicomte, and stated that a sudden illness of his father's had summoned him from Paris, and that he had obtained a month's leave of absence from his office. Old Morville had had a kind of paralytic seizure, and was very weak and ailing; but no one in D—— had heard of this, for little or no intercourse was kept up between the inhabitants of the town and those of La Morvillière.

"When did you come, Raoul?" asked Félicie, carelessly.

"On Wednesday," was the answer.

"Why, Raoul," was the rejoinder, with

a mocking smile, “you positively do not know what you are saying. You came on Tuesday, and you have been here four whole days without coming to see us. Oh! don’t deny it, for we saw you on Tuesday night coming down into the road by the path leading from the woods. Surely you must have remarked us. You must have recognised Baptiste in the moonlight.”

Raoul looked singularly annoyed and embarrassed, and at last ended by admitting that he had arrived on the Tuesday night, and that, not finding the D—— diligence at the station, he had come on foot, taking a short road across the hill and through the woods.

“Short road, if you will, my lad,” observed the Vicomte; “but it’s a good fourteen miles’ walk.”

“And I really cannot think how you came not to see the carriage. The moon was quite bright just then,” persisted Félicie.

“Well, I think I remember that I did see a carriage,” replied young Morville; “but I certainly did not recognise the man who was driving it. I suppose I was thinking of something else.”

“You must have been deeply absorbed in your thoughts then,” exclaimed Félicie; “for Baptiste is not precisely a microscopical personage, and you have known him ever

since he used to wheel us altogether up and down the garden in his barrow."

Raoul was evidently uncomfortable, Félicie was malicious in her playfulness, and Vévette was miserable, she neither knew why nor whencefore. The whole was unsatisfactory and odd. Every one thought so, but no one said it.

Vévette felt that some harm threatened Raoul de Morville. What might be its nature, or whence it came, she knew not, but the instinct was as strong as it was sure; and from the moment in which this unmistakable touch of reality came upon her, all the fictions of her education flew to the winds. Raoul was in danger, and now she knew how she loved him. What the danger was, what the harm that menaced him,—that she could not define; but in the dread of his having to pass through some hard and terrible suffering, everything else was lost to her sight. She did not stop to discuss whether it was wrong to love thus; she did not ask herself even whether she should ever be Raoul's wife; she simply felt that she would risk life, happiness, everything, sooner than that harm should come to him.

Raoul had avowed,—or rather he had not denied to her, on the last day when they met,—that he had some "trouble,"

What was it? How could she find out? How could she help him? Poor Vévette's experience of life was as limited as that of a child, and all that she did know led her to suppose that no one had any grief unconnected with money. From her earliest memory she had always heard talk of money, and been forced to conclude from what she heard that the aim of every one's life was to keep his own money and add to it that of other people. It is true she had been invariably taught that the mere possessors of wealth were to be despised, and that honour was due alone to good birth; but, at the same time, she had had it strongly impressed on her that the well-born were somehow or other to be made rich, and that in their achievement of riches lay the perfect fitness of things.

Vévette's mere judgment, then, told her that Raoul was probably suffering some grievous pecuniary embarrassment; but something beyond her judgment, higher than it, told her it was a peril of a graver kind that threatened him. She half determined to consult the Curé, but hesitated for many reasons, one of which was, that Monsieur le Curé himself was just then not so accessible as usual, but seemed to be almost out of temper, and to hold

converse unwillingly with those who sought him. On the other hand, Raoul came but seldom to the Château, declaring that his father took up his whole time; and when he did come, Vévette's stolen glances at him were met by looks so mournful in their lovingness, that misery and dread entered deeper and deeper into the poor child's heart. What could be impending?

The Curé had remarked that for many weeks the Breton woodcutter had neglected attending mass, and though it was not his custom either to note down those who remained away from church, or to think less well of them because they did so, still, the peculiar character of Prosper Morel, and his strong superstitious tendencies, made it strange that he should thus absent himself for a continued length of time from all celebration of divine worship.

One morning in April Monsieur le Curé sallied forth after early mass, and took a turn through the market-place. It was market-day, and all the housekeepers of the town and its environs were busy haggling and clamouring over their bargains. Madame Jean was busier and more authoritative than any one else, for she had the countenance of military authority wherever she went, and woe betide any luckless peasant woman who might attempt to gain,

no matter how little, upon the weight of what she sold, or prevaricate upon the freshness of eggs, butter, or poultry. She would have had to settle accounts with the brigadier, who, on market days, was almost always to be seen in the near neighbourhood of Madame Jean, lending her an importance which neither she nor those about her disdained. But the sword yields precedence to the Church, and “Monsieur Frédéri” fell back respectfully when he saw Monsieur le Curé approaching Madame Jean.

“I wish you would tell me what you know of old Prosper Morel,” were the first words addressed by the parish priest to Richard Prévost’s housekeeper. “As far as I have remarked, he has been more than two months without coming to church; for him that is odd.”

Madame Jean looked the Curé full in the face. “Two months!” echoed she; “why, saving your reverence, I don’t believe he’s put his foot there for—for—let me see,” and she counted on her fingers, “one, two, three, four, five—yes, five,” and then she mumbled, “March, February, January, December, November—five full months. I don’t believe, Monsieur le Curé, that old Prosper has ever been inside the church since the day of the Feast for the Dead.”

"Impossible!" retorted the Curé. "I'm quite certain I've seen him since then."

"So you may, but not in church. Seen him! Oh yes, so have I, too;—but how? Hulking and skulking about, crawling along close to the walls, and never speaking to mortal creature, but making off, if you see him, like an owl with the daylight let in upon him!"

"But Prosper is a good Christian," urged the Curé. "He never would stay away from church in that way."

Madame Jean turned up her nose, and sniffed the air with a look of something like indignation.

"Church, indeed!" she exclaimed. "Why, Monsieur le Curé, if one is to believe all one hears, the old savage—those Bas-Bretons are no better—has been and built himself some sort of a church or chapel of his own, where he keeps up a psalm-singing and a howling day and night, just as if he were a heretic, neither more nor less."

"Have you spoken to Monsieur Richard about him?" inquired the Curé very calmly, and in no wise allowing himself to be prejudiced.

"Well now, really, Monsieur le Curé," retorted Madame Jean, "where would be the good of speaking to Monsieur Richard?

Primo, he's always for showing every indulgence towards old Prosper, under pretence that he was nursed by Prosper's wife; and, secundo, he don't get stronger or better able to bear worry than he used to be. He's very weak indeed, is Monsieur Richard, and nobody knows the trouble I have with him only to persuade him to eat a little wholesome soupe grasse, or a white of a chicken, and not to be always stuffing himself with sweets, creams, and jellies, and sugar-plums, that only turn on his stomach and make him sickly, and shivery, and fractious, just like a baby! And that's what he is, poor Monsieur Richard; for all the world, just like a baby!"

While Madame Jean was delivering herself of this harangue, the Curé had been apparently communing with himself rather earnestly. With one hand thrust into the pocket of his soutane, he employed the other in shifting his black calotte about upon his big head, now bringing it down to his very nose, and then pushing it back to the nape of his neck. Then he suddenly fished up a blue checked cotton handkerchief from the depths of his pocket, blew his nose vigorously, put the kerchief back, rammed both his hands into his pockets, said, "Bon jour, Madame Jean" rather abruptly, and

marched off, across the Place, to the side street which led him up to his own dwelling.

A quarter of an hour later, Monsieur le Curé might be seen, with his broad-brimmed hat upon his head, and a good strong stick in his hand, walking over the stones to the spot where they cease at the entrance into the town of D—. The day was bright and warm, soft and sunny, and though it was only the first week in April, there was green everywhere,—that beautiful, delicate green through which the sun shines so pleasantly, and which is so suggestive of youth,—the youth of the year. When Monsieur le Curé got upon the high road, he suddenly turned to the left, and struck into the little path that led up the bank, and passed, as we have already been told, through Richard Prévost's woods. He walked on up the hill till at the top he reached a flat part of the country, divided between cornfields and woods; and skirting a field where the young wheat was just beginning to throw its verdant robe over the brown earth, he plunged completely into the shade of the woods, and made for the plantations of tall timber.

In the middle of a clearing, which our pedestrian soon reached, ten long and tolerably straight alleys met, and a board nailed to

the stem of a beech-tree informed you that this was called “L’Etoile des dix routes.” Between two of these forest avenues, and backed by thick towering woods, in which the axe had not been busy for some years, stood a solid, well-enough built woodman’s hut. The door was well-hinged, and the window-panes unbroken. All looked to be in fairly good order. This was Prosper Morel’s abode, and Monsieur le Curé went straight up to the door, knocked at it, and got no answer. He tried to open it. It was locked. He examined the two windows. The board serving as a shutter was up at both. Monsieur le Curé walked round and round, and called Prosper with a loud voice, but got no answer. All was still, and as Monsieur le Curé had had a good stout walk, and had left home before the hour at which he usually partook of his second breakfast, he felt hungry, and not undesirous of a little repose. He seated himself on the log of a felled tree, and took from his pocket a large slice of bread, a piece of cheese, and a book. When he had eaten the bread and cheese, he betook himself to the book, and read, and rested himself for half an hour. At last he rose, and looked again on all sides, and called, but still no one came; and so Monsieur le Curé got up to go home, saying to himself, “I can make

out nothing that looks like a chapel." He proceeded home leisurely and musingly, and every now and then stopping to take off his hat, and rub his hand over his forehead.

He had got more than half way upon his journey back to D——, when he heard what he supposed to be the call of one woodsman to another, or of a shepherd to his dog. He stopped and listened. It was very indistinct; but still he heard it again. It seemed to be a good way off, and to come from the part where the woods were thickest. At last he clearly made out that the direction he was taking led him nearer to the sound, and he pursued his path, listening, stopping, and then instinctively holding his breath, in order to listen better. The sound was an inexplicable one—something between a moan and a yell; and as the Curé got nearer, he perceived that it was, in fact, a succession of continuous sounds, and that when the louder cries ceased, they were exchanged for a rapid droning sort of utterance, which at first he could not rightly understand. The wood grew very thick as he advanced, and the path very narrow, winding through tangled brushwood and briars, and extremely damp under foot.

For a moment or two the sounds had ceased, but the Curé kept on his path cau-

tiously, for fear of being heard. Through a break in the bushes he now saw a small open space where the grass grew high, and at one end of which had been raised a species of shed. It was a queer, rude kind of construction, thatched with straw, quite open as far as one half of it went, and the other half was rudely and imperfectly closed by very clumsily made hurdles. The Curé had hardly had time to render to himself an account of what he saw, when the chanting recommenced.

It was the Litanies for the dead. The droned or muttered parts were the repeated appeals of the actual Litany, whilst the words "Libera me!" were shouted out with terror-stricken force, and with what was really sometimes a perfect yell.

At first the Curé could not see the man who chanted the dismal invocation, for he was seemingly behind the shed, but a few seconds brought him to view. It was old Prosper Morel, who, with a crucifix in his hands, strode round and round the shed, at a solemn measured pace, and as though following the procession before Mass on All Souls' Day. The woodcutter was so altered that he looked as though twenty years had passed over him. The flesh had apparently dried up, and only wrinkled skin covered the bony structure of the man. The joints

seemed absolutely monstrous, and knees, ankles, shoulders, elbows, and wrists stood out in huge disproportion to the shrunk and dwindled portions of the frame they held together. The nose was a very vulture's beak, rising between the two sharp protruding cheek-bones that literally overhung the hollow cavities where the cheeks had sunk in. But what struck you more than all were the eyes. Naturally enlarged by the shrinking of the flesh from the other features, their balls seemed starting from their sockets. But it was less the glare of the eyes that arrested your attention than their fixity. They appeared invariably to stare at some one object, and the lids did not look as though they could ever close over the eyes themselves.

What with his emaciation, and the patched and tattered condition of his raiment, Prosper was a grim object as he went stalking round and round, staring through space, with his crucifix clutched with both hands, close to his breast, and chanting the Litanies for the dead.

The Curé resolved to watch minutely the movements of the man, and his whereabouts, before coming forward to make himself known. Accordingly, therefore, as the Breton went to this side or that, he, too, shifted his hiding-place, going from

behind one large tree to another. What he saw was this;—there, where the shed was open, there was visible inside it, and at the back, under the slope of the roof, a sort of chapel. Several large logs of wood piled up together, and covered with a sheet, made a kind of altar, and on this were grouped specimens of most of the things used in connection with the ceremonies of the Church. There were images of every description, large and small, in wood and in wax; images of the Virgin and of our Saviour, and of various Saints. There were candlesticks of copper, brass, and tin, with tapers in them; and hung all round there were pictures of Holy Families or Martyrs, such as you buy from pedlars and hawkers for a few sous.

The back of the shed was formed by a flat blank wall of planks coarsely nailed together and painted black, on which were drawn in white chalk a most confusing mass of hieroglyphical signs and figures, disjointed words, huge capital letters, verses of Psalms, and uncouth portraiture of human beings.

While the Curé was busy trying to make out what these extraordinary drawings could mean, the chanting ceased, and in a few minutes the bûcheron came round with heavy, drawling steps, without his

crucifix, but with something in his hand which the Curé could not distinguish. His eyes were still fixed on vacancy, and he was muttering a prayer half aloud. He walked straight up to the blackened wall, rubbed out a string of words and figures with his sleeve, and with what he held in his right hand began to write down others in their place. The operation was a slow one, but by degrees, as the Curé watched, he saw grow under the old man's fingers the phrase—

“De profundis clamavi”

Just then rang out clearly in the distance the chimes of the church of D——, and the twelve strokes marking the hour of noon. This proved to Monsieur le Curé that he was nearer to the town than he had at first supposed.

He determined now to try the effect of personal communication, and stepping forward from behind the cover of his tree, he addressed the man. “Prosper Morel,” said he, coming straight up to the bûcheron, “what is it you are doing here?” The old man sprang back with an agility you could not have imagined to belong to him, and then suddenly, as it were, collapsed altogether, and fell down at the root of a tall sycamore, huddled up, and with only

his two arms stretched out to their utmost length, as though to ward off some attack. "Prosper," repeated the Curé, coming closer, but speaking very gently, "I have not come to harm you. Tell me why you are here?"

But, seemingly, speech was impossible, for the woodcutter only writhed and gibbered, and stretched out his hands against the intruder more and more. At last, by a violent effort, he raised himself against the trunk of the tree, and stood upright, glowering at the Curé, whose quiet persistence nevertheless appeared to be acting magnetically upon him.

After a few minutes' struggling, speech, though imperfect, came; and then, with a scream of terror, he spoke. "Master! master!" shrieked Prosper, "I won't go alone with you! Take him too;—take him!"

"Do you not know me, Prosper Morel?" asked the Curé, as he thought he perceived some sign of wavering in the man's eye.

"Yes! yes!" he gasped in agony, clasping his hands with convulsive energy. "Know you? yes! It is you who told him to come for me,—told me he would come, and look at me face to face,—but I won't go;" — and he threw his arms

behind him fiercely, round the trunk of the tree;—“I won’t go alone with him! Tell him to take the other too,—the other,—the other! Tell him to take him!” And then his hold relaxed, his knees knocked together, his body bent forwards, and he dropped senseless to the ground.

* * * *

When Monsieur le Curé reached his home that afternoon he was no wiser than he had been when he left it. He felt that there was something wrong somewhere; but what seemed to him the most evident result of the whole was that, with his sermon on All Souls’ Day, he had completely deranged the old woodcutter’s already weak intellect.

But was Prosper only mad? or . . . ?

It was a terrible question, and Monsieur le Curé was sorely perplexed.

CHAPTER XVII.

IS HE MAD ?

YES, indeed, Monsieur le Curé was sorely perplexed. The more he thought of it the more he felt persuaded that there was something beyond mental derangement in old Prosper's behaviour. Of proof of this, when the Curé came to cross-examine himself as to what he had actually seen and heard, he could find none. Prosper had always been a strange, gloomy man, weak-witted and superstitious, and nothing was more likely than that what had happened since his master's death should have completely upset his reasoning faculties. Any doctor accustomed to treat lunatics would regard it as quite an ordinary case ; and yet, in spite of this, the Curé felt that there was more and worse in it than this came to, and the thought pursued and haunted him day and night.

In order to recall more clearly to his mind all the minutest circumstances con-

nected with the murder of Martin Prévost, the Curé contrived, very ingeniously as he thought, to provoke conversation upon that subject with all those who had at the time been called upon to investigate the case. From all that he could gather by talking to the Maire, and the Juge de Paix, and the Doctor, and the brigadier de gendarmerie, never was a fact more satisfactorily established than that the murder of Martin Prévost was committed by some one from without,—some one whose mere object was to rob the old man of his money, and who had successfully escaped all pursuit.

As to Prosper Morel,—beyond what had led to his arrest, namely, the fact of his having a short time previously vowed vengeance upon his master for an offence which was shown to have been condoned and forgotten,—beyond that one fact, nothing in all the evidence collected pointed at him ; and, on the contrary, the whole of that evidence had so thoroughly excluded any notion of his culpability, that his imprisonment was a subject of regret to every one ; for it was generally supposed that it had had a fatal effect upon the old Breton's mind and health.

The incident which had, at the time, struck every one as alone likely to afford a clue to the criminal, had remained wholly

unfathomable. The footsteps, namely, which led from the house to the garden, and ceased on the edge of the little stream, or rather ditch, close to the Chôlet high road, had never been made to coincide with boot or shoe wearable by any individual connected far or near with old Prévost or his house.

"I know what I have thought sometimes since then," said one day the brigadier de gendarmerie, in a moment of supreme confidence; "but one never likes to cast a suspicion on any one;—above all, when one belongs to the Executive authority!" And Monsieur Frédéri drew himself up majestically.

"Did you suspect any one in D——, then?" asked the Curé, with a shudder.

"At the time, no," was the reply; "but since, I have often thought that——" he paused. "Well, Monsieur le Curé, to you I don't mind confiding my secret thoughts. If I had been Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction, I would have had that sharper, Léon Duprez, arrested." And as he uttered these last words he lowered his voice.

"Léon Duprez?" echoed the Curé, with a start of surprise; "why, what could possibly make you suspect him?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Curé; I repeat it, at the time, nothing; but have you never

reflected that he left D—— immediately after the crime, and we now know under what circumstances he left it, and what a pressing need he must have been under at that identical moment for a few thousand francs?"

The Curé stared at the gendarme in mute astonishment.

"Yes," continued the latter; "my suspicion is so strong, that if the scoundrel were not away in Australia, if he were anywhere within my reach, I would now do everything in my power to get him arrested, so persuaded do I feel that, in some way or other, he had to do with the murder of old Monsieur Prévost."

This was a totally new light to the Curé, and only contributed to perplex him more and more; and, strange to say, instead of delivering him from all preoccupation as far as the woodcutter was concerned, it only made those preoccupations more complicated and less avoidable. What did the Breton mean when he raved about "the other?" Who was that "other?"

Though on the day of his strange interview with Prosper Morel, up in the woods, the Curé had ended,—after the bûcheron had regained his senses,—by calming the old man's agitation, and inducing him to listen to him quietly enough, still he had

not advanced one step in the direction of any practical discovery. He had talked to Prosper for nearly an hour, and could not avoid thinking he had done him good; but the principal sign of improvement on the woodcutter's part was afforded by silence.

When once Prosper had been brought to look upon the Curé as a friend, and to acknowledge him in the flesh as his spiritual pastor, a certain load appeared to be taken off his mind,—a certain dread to be mitigated. By degrees, as the Curé spoke and advised, and tried to soothe and comfort him, Prosper seemed to undergo a species of physical relaxation; his nerves ceased their over-tension, he stretched his arms and legs as people do after long illness and fever, and closed his eyes frequently and as with a sensation of relief.

These signs induced the Curé, while Prosper was present, to incline towards the belief that the old man was merely a victim to temporary insanity, or simply hallucination brought on by the tragic events with which he had been indirectly connected, and kept up by the gloom of his solitary life. But when he reflected upon Prosper's conduct, and recurred to his manner, to his look, to the tone of his voice, an instinct awoke that would not be hushed,—an in-

stinct that for ever told him there was more in all this than madness.

All he had gained was, that the wretched old man had listened to him, and had seemingly comprehended what he had said. Naturally, after bringing the Breton to accept his interference, and to submit to his counsels, there was, according to the lights of a sincerely pious Catholic priest, but one course to which he could endeavour to lead him ;—to confess. He could teach him no other lesson save that only one : “Repent, confess, and thy sins shall be forgiven thee ;” and that lesson he taught him.

The woodcutter listened in silence, but he more than once muttered to himself, “Confess ! confess !” and he shivered as with a fit of ague.

“And thy sins shall be forgiven thee,” slowly and impressively added the priest.

But further than that he did not get.

Unfortunately, in small places like D——, nothing can be kept secret, and a distorted account of the Curé’s visit to old Prosper’s abode began to circulate amongst the gossips. Whence did it come ? Who knows ? Perhaps from the brigadier—perhaps from old Lise, “Monsieur le Curé’s Lise,” to whom, after fifteen years passed under the same roof, her master did now and then just hint that he was troubled or

perplexed. However, circulate the story did, and with so many embellishments, that the old Breton was transformed into an object of popular curiosity, and, as the days were fine and beginning to lengthen, knots of mischievous boys would troop off into the woods and organise expeditions to "La Chapelle à Prosper," as they termed it; and the old man's extraordinary demeanour, his "mummeries and antics," as they called them, came to be a grand subject of diversion for the godless crew.

But the behaviour of the bûcheron was altered now. Instead of stalking about and chanting Psalms and Litanies, as he had been used to do, he would sit for hours together, with closed eyes, his chin resting on his clasped hands, and his elbows on his knees. He appeared absorbed in meditation. He was perfectly harmless, and sought in no way to punish his youthful tormentors, but almost seemed to look upon them as a part of the penance he was doomed to undergo. When he believed himself most alone he would suddenly hear a mocking voice calling him by name, and as he turned round, a curly pate, or a smudgy visage, would show itself from behind the tree-stems or the bushes, and grin and make faces at him. They popped out upon him on all sides, dogged his steps, hopped across

his path, and when they had found that he opposed no resistance to their tricks, they, with all the cowardice of "little-boy" nature, set to work to torment him systematically. Nor was it only the very small imps who indulged in this occupation. Their example was soon followed by the lads of fifteen or sixteen, and to these were also too often added the lazy loiterers who, in small provincial towns, have nothing particular to do except lounge away their afternoons at the "*café*," reading the "*Siècle*."

The great amusement was to call upon the woodcutter to confess. First one, and then another, would jump out of the brushwood, and cry out:

"Why don't you go to confession, Prosper?"

"You had better confess!" would add a third.

"If you'll only confess to me, Prosper, I'll give you absolution at once," would observe a fourth.

And the effect was invariably the same. The man listened silently, cast a haggard look around,—very much the look of a frightened animal,—and then rose, and with shambling gait went up to his blackened board behind the shed, and began to write upon it broken and half-illegible sentences

in white chalk. Once established at this work, nothing disturbed him more. Hours would elapse, and he would go on alternately rubbing out words already written, and writing fresh ones in their place.

Day after day people talked of the bûcheron's madness; and at market, and at the café, it was a common subject of discourse; but the Curé was more than ever perplexed, and uneasy in his mind.

"It is a very extraordinary case this of Prosper Morel's," said he one day to young Morville, whom he met accidentally walking towards the High Street of D——; "very extraordinary and perplexing."

"I see nothing in it either very extraordinary or very perplexing," replied Raoul calmly. "The old man's head was always a weak one; what has passed has fairly turned it,—as it well might,—and your own sermon of the Fête des Morts has supplied the one particular image to which the diseased brain has clung ever since. Such cases are far more frequent than you fancy; above all, with such races as those Bas-Bretons,—gloomy, and easily led towards fixed ideas."

"Raoul," said the Curé, after a few steps taken side by side in silence, "old Prosper is no more mad than you or I. That is my conviction."

Young Morville expressed his entire dissent from the Curé's opinion, and they again walked on together in silence till they reached the part of the street just opposite La Maison Prévost. "Good-bye, Raoul," said the Curé, with a slight touch of sadness. "I am going in there. Good-bye; I have seen but little of you since you came. I hardly think you have come once to the Presbytère."

"If you knew what a state my father was in, you would, perhaps, excuse me," rejoined the young man. "I really do not know even now what decision to take. He will probably never recover, and my month's congé is nearly up."

"And then you must go back to Paris?" remarked the Curé. "Or have you any chance of lengthening your leave?"

"I fear not. I have only a week left. I wish, instead of Paris, I were going to Australia." The last words were uttered in a tone of great dejection.

"To Australia?" echoed the Curé, with a start. "Why Australia?"

"Only because it is so much farther off," said young Morville. But there was a bitterness in the look with which he accompanied the words, and altogether an air about him that the Curé could not account for, and that he disliked.

They separated, and Monsieur le Curé, crossing over to La Maison Prévost, told Madame Jean, when she opened the door, that it was absolutely necessary he should see Monsieur Richard. "Of course he won't object to receiving you, but he is very nervous and weak to-day," was Madame Jean's reply, as she ushered the Curé into her master's room. Weak enough and nervous enough he looked, to be sure, as he rose from his fireside to greet the parish priest, and offer him the seat in the opposite corner.

"No, thank you," said the Curé. "I should faint from the heat. Your room is an oven. You should open the window, Monsieur Richard; such a temperature is enough to take all the strength out of you."

"I have none left in me, alas!" rejoined Monsieur Richard in a whining voice. "I get worse and worse, and I believe I shall be forced to change the air, and try Cannes or Hyères for a few weeks. My cough is so troublesome, my breathing so bad, and I cannot sleep."

"Fine weather will do much, my good Monsieur Richard, and we shall soon be having that; but you must excuse me if I come to trouble you upon some very sad business, but where really you are the only

person who can act. Touching old Prosper Morel——”

Monsieur Richard turned round towards the fire, and answered fractiously, “Mon Dieu ! mon Dieu ! how cruel everybody is ! The poor old creature is mad, stark mad, and I will not have him molested with my consent. Do have him left alone. Do let him do what he likes ; he can’t live long, and he hurts nobody.”

“Monsieur Richard,” continued the Curé, gravely—“Prosper is not mad ; that is my deliberate conviction, and he ought, at all events, to be examined by some medical man.”

“Not mad, my dear Monsieur le Curé !” repeated Monsieur Richard, peevishly. “Why, his madness is notorious,—is the talk of the town. What would be the use of a doctor ?”

“The use of a doctor would be to define clearly what is the real mental condition of the man,” retorted the Curé. “If he is insane, he ought to be shut up and attended to ; if he is not——”

“Well, what then ?” inquired Monsieur Richard, almost angrily. “What then ?”

“Why, then,” rejoined the Curé, slowly, “the case ought to be looked into in another way. Prosper is perfectly calm. All his vehemence has subsided, but he is

under the impression of some horrible deed, and he persistently, and day after day, proclaims himself a murderer.” Monsieur Richard shrugged his shoulders, and threw two more logs on the fire. “Prosper’s behaviour is now such as, in my mind, to call for some notice from you, Monsieur Richard, as the nearest relative of the murdered man. He passes his days and nights in writing upon the board behind his strange abode up yonder, the confession of his guilt. Fifty times over you will see the words, ‘Prosper did it,’ written in large characters; and ‘God be merciful to Prosper, the murderer!’”

“And upon such evident marks of insanity as those, you would persecute a poor wretch of this kind?” retorted Richard Prévost.

“That is not all,” urged the Curé. “He invariably alludes to some one else,—says he was not alone,—says there was another person mixed up with him in the crime.”

“Monsieur le Curé,” said Richard Prévost, drawing himself closer into the fire, “all the circumstances of my poor uncle’s death were minutely investigated at the time, and if anything was proved, it was Prosper Morel’s innocence; and I will not have the poor old fellow’s last days tortured with my consent. That the murderer of

my uncle escaped is clear. One day, perhaps, he may be discovered,—people say murderers always are,—but I should think it a positive crime to re-institute fresh proceedings now, upon no surer a basis than the ravings of a wretched idiot who has already lost his reason through our first ill-founded suspicions.”

The Curé argued and argued, but could make no way whatever against Monsieur Richard.

“So you will not take any further proceedings in this matter?” said the priest, when he rose to go.

“None whatever,” answered Richard Prévost. “There has been misery enough. Let poor old Prosper be left in peace. He won’t live long, probably.”

As the Curé was passing out of the room, he turned round with his hand still upon the door; “Remember my words, Monsieur Richard,” he added gravely, “Prosper Morel is not mad.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

ST. MARK'S DAY.

ONE thing was clear to every one, and that was, the alteration that had taken place in young Morville. He had used to be so gay and joyous, so en train, as the French say, so up to everything ! and now he was absorbed and absent, looked exceedingly ill, and moved about as though oppressed by some overwhelming care. Far from seeking the society of any of the people in D——, he apparently avoided all society ; for, as the Curé had truly remarked, he did not go near him, who had been from early youth his best and surest friend, and he neglected the family at the Château, where he had hitherto had a second home.

Monsieur de Vérancour did not spare his observations upon Raoul's conduct, and was for ever commenting upon it in a way that terribly alarmed and pained Vévette. "It is the same with all those young fellows," the Vicomte would say ; "the very moment they get up to Paris it's all over. They

tumble into some mischief or other,—mostly some infamous woman at the bottom of it all, some Dame aux Camélias, or some drôlesse of the demi-monde, which is even worse ; and then come the string of embarrassments and misfortunes, play, debts, and God knows what all. They borrow what they can't pay, and they know they can't ; but that's no matter ; they go on all the same, and hope some miracle will be performed in their favour ; and the end of it all is, the ruin of papa and mamma and the whole family, who have to pay for the young gentleman's misdeeds. But when there is neither papa nor mamma nor family, the end is another one,—disgrace, or suicide, or both ; mighty lucky when it isn't dishonour, or the Bagne for forgery : but it's always the same thing, and if ever I saw any one who bore all the marks of having got into a mess, it is Raoul."

And then the Vicomte usually wound up by some bitter remarks upon the people of the present day who go themselves, or send their sons, up to Paris to make money, and said how infinitely preferable was the quiet life and honest mediocrity of the province, where your ancestors had lived and died before you ! "It might be dull," opined the Vicomte self-righteously ; "it might be humdrum, but it was honourable, and ac-

cording to the traditions of old French ways and customs."

Monsieur de Vérancour never seemed to think it otherwise than "highly honourable" to contemplate the sale of his child to a man she despised; and such bargains formed part of what he thought the superior morality of provincial life.

Now, poor Vévette was breaking her heart all this while, and suffering martyrdom in silence. What she heard whispered about her, and what her father said aloud, would have been nothing had her own heart not failed her. But her own heart had told her, long before others spoke, that something was wrong, very wrong, with Raoul. A girl, brought up as girls are in France, may sometimes love quickly, yet be very long before she knows that she loves. The everyday life of respectable families is singularly flat and monotonous, and helps to lead a girl on from the cradle to the grave in ignorance of what lies hidden in her soul. But if once the accident happen, if once the calm be broken,—beware!

And thus it had been with Vévette; she had been true to her teachers so long as she could be so, so long as she lived their life instead of her own; but as soon as the measure of her suffering taught her the measure of her love, as soon as she knew

beyond all doubt that she loved Raoul better than everything else upon earth, and that for his loss Paradise itself would not compensate, then the aspects and the aims and purposes of her life changed, and she was another than the self she had hitherto been. Had any one about her really cared to discover what was passing in the poor child's physical and mental condition, the perturbation would have been easily seen. She had grown miserably thin from anxiety and sleeplessness, but her cheek had a flush and her eye had a brilliancy that misled those uninterested in her happiness. The excitement within threw its fever-mantle round her, and they took it for bloom.

"How wonderfully well your sister looks," said the Vicomte to Félicie; "she is growing extremely handsome. I never saw her look so well, and she is so lively." "Yes," the latter would answer, "she is even too lively; she is restless and brusque; she was not used to be so, but I suppose it is one of the changes girls sometimes go through. It is very lucky she is not called upon to make a great sacrifice for others,—to immolate herself; for I do not think she would be equal to it. Vévette is becoming self-willed; indeed, almost wilful." And so saying, Mademoiselle Félicie would sigh, and look full of compunction for her sister's sins.

On the 25th of April there was a kind of fête at D——. It was the feast of St. Marc, which had been time out of mind kept as a holiday in that locality, and at which it was customary that every one in the neighbourhood should be present. The amusements of the fête were all grouped together in the fields that lay between D—— and the village of St. Philbert; and upon a piece of land visible from the terrace of the Château, and called the Pré St. Marc, were to be found all the usual attractions of such popular gatherings as these. There were the menageries, and the giants and dwarfs, and learned dogs and pigs and birds, and magicians, and Dutch toupies, and gingerbread-stalls; and there, also, was the space set aside for dancing, under the wide-spreading boughs of two enormous chestnut-trees. When night came, all this was to be illuminated with coloured lamps, but the festivities of the night were left chiefly to the enjoyment of the lower orders, or to individuals of the masculine sex alone among their betters. The fashionable hour for attending the fête was late in the afternoon, from four to six or half-past,—what determined provincials still called, before supper. At that hour all the notables were sure to be found congregating together round the roots of the chestnut-trees, and

either looking on at the dancers or taking part in the dance; for it was the custom that upon this occasion there should be a perfect confusion of ranks.

Monsieur le Maire and his spouse, and the Juge de Paix, and the notary, and all the other dignitaries of D——, had already appeared upon the Pré St. Marc, when the Vicomte was seen approaching with his two daughters and Monsieur le Curé, and followed by Richard Prévost and the doctor, who had been expressing his satisfaction at the improvement in Monsieur Richard's health. Besides these, there were several visitors from châteaux in the environs; and one gossip,—but then that was that mischievous woman Madame Joséphine le Vaillant, the wife of the Juge de Paix,—declared she had seen Monsieur de Champmorin lounging about.

However that may be, Félicie did assuredly look pretty and graceful enough to have been worth any suitor's while to woo. As to Vévette, her beauty took people by surprise, for they were not used to think anything of her, as the common phrase runs, and it was strange to be positively dazzled by what you have never been taught to regard as a light.

The sisters were dressed nearly alike, excepting only that the elder wore blue,

and the younger pink ribbons. Both had on white dresses and straw hats; and whilst the soft colours of her blue streamers harmonised so delightfully with Félicie's delicate, even complexion, and light, wavy, chestnut hair, that you could not help seeing she had studied her effects, the rosy hue of Vévette's trimmings, that would have been so set off by her thick flaxen tresses, paled under the damask flush of her burning cheek and the scarlet of her unquiet lip.

It was a general remark how much better poor Monsieur Richard looked, and everybody seemed glad thereat; for, excepting the purchase of the little carriage from Tours, Richard Prévost had given no sign of enjoying his wealth, and his weak health was such an obstacle to his ever thoroughly enjoying it, that his neighbours were pleased with him, and patronised him, and morally patted him on the back.

When the usual observations on the weather, and the fact of this being the very finest St. Marc ever remembered, were at an end, one of the first subjects of general conversation was the insanity of old Prosper.

“I really am tired to death of hearing that poor unfortunate old creature talked of incessantly,” said Félicie. “It is pre-

cisely what is so odious in provincial life; one never hears the last of anything, however trivial or unimportant it may happen to be." This remark had been made to Monsieur le Curé and Richard Prévost, who were both standing beside Mademoiselle de Vérancour when she spoke. But it was also heard by Monsieur le Maire, who by no means agreed in this system of disparaging the province.

"It is possible, mademoiselle," said he, "that in a great centre like Paris, crime itself may pass unnoticed, but I am old-fashioned enough to prefer provincial ways, and not to quarrel with what after all only proves an extreme susceptibility to the state of public morality;" and then he, too, launched out into a tirade about the old French ways and customs, and tradition, and drew from it all the plain inference that crime was the daily bread of the Parisians.

"Crime! my dear sir," retorted Félicie, with that peculiar mixture of contempt and condescension she sometimes assumed, "but there is no question of crime in all this; it is a question only of insanity, and the poor old man up yonder will be probably worried to death by the gossips of D——."

"I assure you, mademoiselle," persisted

the Maire, “it is a most extraordinary case, if all that is reported be true.”

The Curé and Richard Prévost had left the little group to speak to some fresh arrivals from St. Philbert, and the Vicomte, who had rejoined his daughters, now took part in the conversation. “It really does seem to me,” said he, “that what it is the fashion now to call the public, does, as usual, meddle most impertinently in what does not concern it. Surely as long as the one person who is alone entitled to interfere remains silent, no one else has any right to raise his voice. If Monsieur Richard is convinced of that miserable old man’s innocence, whose business can it possibly be to accuse or suspect him?” But the Maire was inclined to support the cause of what he called public justice, and he was beginning to argue the point with the Vicomte, when the band charged with the musical department of the fête plunged with such diabolical energy into a contre-danse, that no more talk was just then practicable.

Monsieur le Maire requested the honour of Mademoiselle Félicie’s hand, whilst—the Mairesse being infirm and unable to dance—Monsieur de Vérancour performed vis-à-vis to them with a very portly and consequential personage, Madame Valentin,

the grocer's wife, out and out the richest bourgeoisie in D——, and reputed to entertain the most advanced opinions both in religion and polities. It had even been whispered that Madame Valentin was encouraging her husband to lend money to a certain lawyer of Republican tendencies, who dreamed of setting up a liberal newspaper, to be called "Le Drapeau du Département," with a view to waging war upon the Préfet's pet organ. However, notwithstanding her political bias, the epicier's spouse seemed well pleased with her cavalier, for she laughed with all her teeth, which were fine, as she ducked down through the chaîne anglaise, and came back with evident glee to her partner after an en-avant-deux.

Meanwhile our friend Madame Jean had been led forth among the side couples by the brigadier, who was observed invariably to encircle her waist with his arm and perform a pirouette à la militaire with her, each time that the figure of the quadrille placed him face to face with his partner. "She won't marry him any more for all that," whispered the lanky over-grown son of the Juge de Paix to Mère Jubine's Louison, with whom he was dancing.

But Louison was busy admiring Monsieur Richard.

Yes! there was some one for whom Richard Prévost was not “poor Monsieur Richard;” some one for whom he was a grand gentleman, and the type of all elegance and fashion!

As we have said, Richard Prévost was not ill-looking; he appeared to be weakly,—that was all,—and was pre-eminently what the Provençal terms “not much of a man;” but for the old washerwoman’s daughter, herself the very handsomest girl of her class in D——, this very delicacy was refinement; and Monsieur Richard, with his blond hair elaborately curled by the coiffeur, and his glossy whiskers, his blue cravat, and pale lilac kid gloves, his superb watch-chain, and with clouds of perfume over all, was the very finest gentleman she had ever seen, or would ever have a chance of seeing. And so Mère Jubine’s Louison was all eyes for Monsieur Richard, and paid no attention to what the pale-faced lanky son of the Juge de Paix was saying to her about Madame Jean and her military lover.

Just before the contre-danse had begun, Raoul de Morville had passed close to the group where the Vicomte and his daughters were standing. Greetings had been exchanged, and as Monsieur le Maire carried off Félicie as his partner, Vévette had

turned round as if with a sudden impulse:—“Have you forsaken dancing, Raoul?” she asked, trying to smile very gaily. “We used always to dance together at the St. Marc when we were children.”

“Shall we do so now?” was the answer; and Raoul went towards the dancers with Vévette on his arm.

While they danced together, they never spoke once, but once their hands met; hers lingered in his, and with that touch all words were made superfluous.

When the contre-danse was over, they were for a few minutes separated from the crowd. “Why have you never been near us?” inquired Vévette in a low tone. “Have you forgotten us?”

“Forgotten you, Vévette!” The way in which the words were uttered forced her to look at Raoul, and when their eyes had met she had no further need to be reassured.

“Then, Raoul,” she added, taking courage, “what is the reason you keep away? What has happened?”

“Oh, Vévette,” he rejoined, with an accent of what seemed almost like despair, “so much has happened. Little enough, perhaps, for others, but for me everything;” and then he paused, while she looked and listened in breathless anxiety. “Suppose,” he continued, “that all my hopes were at

an end ; that I could never look forward to our marriage. What would remain to me if I consented to live on, but to go away as far as I possibly could ;—to put the seas between us ? If all possible idea of your one day being mine had to be given up, my duty, however hard, would be to avoid you, and my last chance would be to fly to the end of the world—to New Zealand or Australia."

"No, Raoul, not that," was the rejoinder, but given in a voice he had never heard come from those lips before.

"Alas ! and why not ?" he asked mournfully.

"Because I should die if you did." They looked for a second steadfastly at each other ; but the Vévette who stood before Raoul now he had never known. All colour had flown from her lips and cheek, and the flame in her eyes had darkened, as it were ; the truth had compelled her ; the shy convent-bred girl was gone ; and in her place was the passionate woman, really loving unto death.

It was not in masculine nature not for one instant to be enraptured at the avowal thus desperately made, and for one instant Raoul's whole countenance glowed with the glory of being loved. "Then, my own," he resumed fondly, "you must know what has happened, you must know all."

you alone must decide what shall be our future. Come what will, in three days I must be in Paris, but——”

“In Paris, in three days?” gasped Vévette.

“That must be, darling,” he replied soothingly; “but that is a minor evil. I will tell you the cause of all my misery, and I swear to abide by your decision. Don’t look so terrified, love; listen to me; I have——” But all further conversation was cut short by Monsieur le Maire, who strutted up to solicit the honour of Mademoiselle Vévette’s hand.

When the quadrille was over, the eternal topic of old Prosper Morel was recurred to, for the benefit of a visitor at a neighbouring château to whom the entire story was new. “Do you know, Monsieur le Vicomte,” urged Monsieur le Maire, harking back to his old argument of “public justice,”—“Do you know that what Joseph le Vaillant tells is passing strange all the same?”

“Oh! so you’ve been inspecting poor old Prosper, have you?” asked Monsieur de Vérancour, with a supercilious glance at the Juge de Paix’s son.

“I went up there yesterday,” replied the lanky youth.

“Well, and what did you see that was so wonderful?”

"Oh, only Prosper's drawings, and the same words over and over. 'Prosper did it,' and then the date, '14th of October.' His new mania is to draw a kind of figure of a guillotine with three great capital letters under it, a P, an M, and an R. Always these three same; and sometimes they stand under a guillotine, sometimes flames are pictured under them: but always these three letters are repeated; and over the guillotine he mostly writes, 'Expiation!' And then he sits down before the drawing and looks at it till your flesh creeps as you look at him. Is not that a queer thing, Monsieur le Vicomte?"

"An M, that's Morel," said Monsieur de Vérancour, "and P, that's Prosper; but what's R for?"

"Well, perhaps Retribution!" opined the Juge de Paix.

"I will go up in a day or two and see to all this myself," said Monsieur le Maire. "I can't go to-morrow, but I will positively go the day after."

The Vicomte shrugged his shoulders.

"Poor devil!" said he, "they'll torture him to death."

"I incline to think the Maire is quite right," observed the Curé gravely. "I can't help believing there is more in all this than you fancy."

CHAPTER XIX.

PROSPER'S ARREST.

UPON the face of it, was there enough to account for Raoul de Morville's sore depression of spirits? That question touches the individual appreciation of suffering, which is different in each human being. What to one is but a feather, may to another be a weight beneath which he is crushed. If young Morville's past life, and the hopes upon which his whole heart had centred, be taken into consideration, it is certain that he had good cause to feel exceedingly unhappy.

If the circumstances wherewith love is surrounded in different countries be well examined, it will be seen that nothing can be more various than the aspects of the passion which many people falsely believe to be the same everywhere.

If a man without fortune love a girl without a farthing, in England, need he despair? No! for he has resources open to him: he

can work and win her, he can emigrate to one of the many lands where English is spoken, and by dint of toil, time, and endurance, it is more than probable he may end by gaining enough to enable him to unite himself to her without whom life seems to him worthless. At all events he has society and public opinion on his side. For his energy and for her constancy everybody will think higher of the couple who wish to marry for love.

But not so in France. In the first place, the man who, without money, wishes to gain it in order to marry the woman he has chosen, has a marvellously small choice of means whereby to achieve his aim. If he has financial aptitudes, no scruples, and great luck, he may by some stroke on the bourse, in which he has risked honour,—in case of failure,—achieve fortune; but the man capable of that is mostly a man incapable of the devotion we suppose him setting out to serve. For a chivalrous minded man,—and the man who resolves to win the girl he loves is that,—it is hard to see any resource in France. How he is to achieve independence in a country where every single field for activity, large or small, is fenced in and set aside, and where nothing is open to individual energy, it is hard to see; but what is worse is,

that he has society, and the opinion of all the men and women in it, against him. He must do whatever he does without ever allowing his motive to be guessed, or he is lost. His friends would set him down for a fool, and the rest of the world for something near akin to a perturbator of general morality.

All that esteem, all that sympathetic encouragement which are so necessary to the man who has to fight a hard fight, are denied in France to the man who dreams of marrying for love. He becomes a species of pariah, whom it is unsafe to let inside your doors. If he, being without money, chose to love a girl who has plenty, that is quite another thing. If he wins her, he will be applauded because the love can be denied. If a very rich man, on the other hand, be resolved to marry a woman who is poor, that again will be tolerated ;—though not viewed so favourably as the preceding case, because it gives doubly a bad example : first, to rich sons of families who, independently of their parents, may take to marrying penniless wives ; and next, to dowerless girls, who may nourish illusions and become dangerous to the peace of respectable families.

No ! The fitness of things lies in the union of money with money. That is

according to rule. What is so also, is the union of high birth with wealth. In this arrangement also there is a fitness pleasant to contemplate, for there is an exchange of valuables. Something is sold and something bought, and it is altogether a business transaction,—in which a Frenchman tells you, you find “a guarantee!”

But in a marriage of poverty with poverty there is no “guarantee,” and the love which induces it is only an “aggravating circumstance.”

Now, Raoul's position was in this respect the worst of all possible positions. He had conceived the mad idea of winning by his own exertions the hand of a girl who was as poor as himself. He had no excuse, for he had been brought up with Félicie and Vévette, and knew their pecuniary situation as well as he knew his own. Of course, if Mademoiselle Geneviève de Vérancour shared his absurd notions, it was wholly and entirely his fault; for unless he had forced them upon her, how should a well-born girl, educated in a convent too! ever entertain any idea so utterly wrong as that of marrying for love? All the blame would be Raoul's; and had he any, the remotest chance, of earning for himself the even relative independence that would enable him to aspire to the hand of his beloved?

Perhaps there had been a time, not far off, when he had thought that his hopes might be realised ; but what were his present prospects ? He had twelve hundred francs a year for working hard in a public office for eight hours a day ! Forty-eight pounds per annum would not go far to maintain a wife, let alone children. And what were his other chances ? Perhaps promotion in six or eight years, and a salary of seventy-five, or it might be a hundred pounds yearly ;—for he had no “protection.”

All this was disheartening enough, and Raoul was disheartened. He loved Vévette with his whole heart and soul, and could see nothing in life worth having if she failed him. But he sickened at the notion of waiting for long years. He wanted Vévette to be his now ; now, while he and she were young, and the first bloom was on their love. More even than the cheerlessness of his prospects he felt the hardness of being obliged to hide his one object in life as though it were a crime. As a man who lives for a passion unconnected with ambition or interest, Raoul was a man out of all communion with his fellow-countrymen ; and if you examine impartially his position, his nature, and his probable chances, you will perhaps see that he had some cause for apparent despair.

In three days he was to leave D——. When to return, and with what hopes? As he thought of this and this only, it is no wonder that he paid but little attention to the events which in D—— were marching on apace.

The day following the St. Marc, Monsieur le Maire could not, as he said, go and visit the old bûcheron, but the day after he did so, and his visit had a remarkable result. Monsieur le Maire was an early riser, and the clocks had not yet struck eight when he turned into the narrow path which, through the brushwood and brambles, led to the spot where Prosper Morel had erected his present abode. The dew was still heavy on the ground, and the damp under foot and over head made the place remarkably cheerless, apart from the gloom which was cast around it by its strange occupant.

When Monsieur le Maire reached the spot on which stood the shed called La Chapelle à Prosper, there was no sign of any inhabitant, no trace of the whereabouts of a living man. The Maire went straight up to the open side of the shed, and examined minutely all the ornaments and accessories of the chapel, and when he had done that, he, with the inquisitiveness of a civil functionary which the Curé had not, proceeded to an investigation of the other part of the

rude dwelling. It had seemingly neither door nor window, but on raising the clumsy bit of hurdle-fence with which the opening was closed, you looked into a sort of den or hole in which it was clear that the wood-cutter slept. In one corner was a heap of straw, hay, feather, and fern, all mixed up together, and covered over with a piece of coarse brown blanket very much torn. It was more like the lair of a beast than the resting-place of a man, but it was evidently the old man's bed.

The Maire indulged in a protracted examination of the inside of the establishment, but found nothing to satisfy his curiosity. Of the occupant there was no sign. Leaving the apparent bed-chamber of the bûcheron, and closing it up again with the hurdle, the visitor passed to the outside of the shed and proceeded to study the hieroglyphics of the boarding at the back of it. Yes, truly enough, there they were ;—the figures and images and signs of which so much had been told ! There were the guillotines, and flames, and verses from the Psalms, and over and over repeated, the words : “Prosper did it,” and “God be merciful to the murderer !” And there stood again and again the letters P and M under the guillotine, over the flames ; but of no other letter was there any trace ;

whether the letter R meant Retribution, as the Juge de Paix suggested, or not, was all one ; for there was no letter R to be seen anywhere. To this Monsieur le Maire attached very little importance. It only made him form a rather low estimate of the accuracy of the Juge de Paix's lanky, overgrown boy, who in that respect simply shared in the mind of Monsieur le Maire the disfavour attaching to boys in general, who were all in his opinion more or less stupid and inaccurate.

At last the Maire discovered Prosper Morel. But what was he doing ?

Turning round the corner behind the part of the shed devoted to the chapel, the visitor came upon what looked at first like a heap of old clothes, but what turned out to be the Breton cowering down with hands and knees upon the ground, and apparently groping for something hidden upon, or under the earth. At sight of the intruder Prosper looked up, and turning round seated himself deliberately with his back to the shed and his two hands clasped across his knees. He neither looked angry nor surprised, but gazed intently at the Maire.

" You lead a solitary life out here," began the dignitary.

" No ! " answered the Breton, " my life is peopled. I am never alone."

"Who is with you?" asked the Maire, determined to humour the old man.

"Who is with me?" he echoed. "The past, the past! I'm full of the past."

"Prosper," continued his interlocutor, "I have not come here to do you any harm, but to judge for myself of the strange reports that you encourage by your own conduct. Look at me, Prosper Morel, and try to tell me the real truth. What reason have you for saying the wild things you say? What interest have you in leading the whole town down there to believe that you have committed an awful crime?" While the Maire was speaking, Prosper's countenance underwent no change. All its life was as usual concentrated in the eyes, and these were fixed upon the speaker as though they would absorb his every feature. Slowly he rose, and his huge uncouth figure leaning against the wall, he put forth his arm and fastened his bony fingers upon the Maire's wrist.

"What reason?" he exclaimed; "what interest? What; can't you understand it? My soul! my soul! I want to save that. But that is how you are, you bourgeois, all of you! You go to church, but you don't believe; and you don't care for truth, God's truth, the eternal truth, by which we are saved or damned. You will take the life of

an innocent creature, because you think he seems guilty, and you take no trouble to see whether he is so or not, and when real guilt—the very truth of crime—is brought before you, you won't recognise it, because it is not discovered by the agents of the law. Oh ! Monsieur le Maire, Monsieur le Maire," went on the bûcheron with desperate earnestness, "we have souls; we really have souls, and we can save them."

"But, my good man," objected the other, now seriously inclined to believe in Prosper's insanity, "do you mean then, seriously, to declare that you murdered Martin Prévost ?"

"This hand did the deed," replied the woodcutter, holding up his right hand and spreading its five fingers out to their utmost directly in the face of the Maire, who stepped back a pace or two. "Yes !" resumed the Breton, "this hand, but only this hand; not mind or will; only the hand!"

"And you hope for forgiveness by accusing yourself?" suggested his visitor.

"Hope ! I am sure of it. I have confessed. I confess every day. Come with me !" and before he could resist it, the Maire found himself dragged before the boarding, on which Prosper pointed out to him his gloomy writings. "There," he

said, “and there, and there ! I hide nothing, I give all I have to purchase back my soul, and when the Lord has forgiven me, expiation will come. I wait, I wait ! De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine !” And he crossed his hands on his breast and looked upwards fervently.

The Maire was now all but fully convinced of Prosper’s insanity ; and the latter caught at his conviction by some intuitive sense. “Ah !” he exclaimed, with sudden animation ; “that is so like you all. You don’t believe what you don’t know. Take care, Monsieur le Maire ; take care ! You don’t believe a man has a soul ; you don’t believe he ought to give his life to save it. You wouldn’t save yours with your life, Monsieur le Maire. Saint Thomas ! Saint Thomas ! they must touch, ere they believe. Well then, look here !”

Seizing hold of the Maire’s arm he led him back to the spot where he had himself been discovered cowering down upon the ground. He went down upon both knees, displaced a few loose stones, took up with his nails a square sod of turf, cleared away some mould, and brought to view a small wooden box, the lid of which he opened without taking the box from its resting-place. “There,” he cried, “what do you see now ?—golden Napoleons, and bank-

notes, and papers, and a purse ! There is all that was taken out of Monsieur's strong box when he was dead. There it lies ;--all that you never could find ; all that for which you were so certain he was killed, there it lies ! Now you believe because now you understand. Oh ! you wise, wise men ! And you take to yourselves the right to punish and absolve ! Help me to save my soul, Monsieur le Maire, help me to save my soul ! For now you know I am the murderer of my master."

The Maire was convinced.

* * * * *

That same day, the 27th of April, Prosper Morel was arrested by the brigadier de gendarmerie and his assistants in virtue of a proper warrant, and lodged provisionally in the gaol at D—. He offered no resistance. On the contrary, a curious kind of elation seemed to inspire him, and he walked with a firm step between his captors, into the town of D—, a crucifix clasped with both hands upon his breast, and chanting as he went, in a loud voice, the Litanies for the Dead.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DOUBLE ARREST.

WHATEVER might have been the effect created at the time by old Martin Prévost's death, it was immeasurably surpassed by that which the arrest of the bûcheron produced. There was no end now to the conjectures and speculations; no saying what might not be revealed; no limit to the excitement of the townspeople of D——.

It was scarcely past noon when the Breton was brought a prisoner into the town, and before supper-time every man and woman knew of every detail connected with his arrest,—or at all events talked as if they were thoroughly conversant with them. So great was the agitation of the little place, and so delighted was the little population at having such an occurrence wherewith to occupy itself, that long-standing feuds were healed in the common emotion, that Madame Joséphine le Vaillant condescended to exchange ideas with Ma-

dame Valentin, and that Céleste from the Château, and Madelon from the Mairie, fraternised with Madame Jean;—or rather tried to do so, for that important personage felt her importance doubled, and was less accessible than usual. Madame Jean's importance was doubled, for she held to the mystery by both ends. She was in a manner a co-proprietress of the criminal,—if criminal he was, of which there was no inconsiderable doubt;—while over the executive authority as represented in the person of la gendarmerie itself, who would gainsay her sovereign influence?

There was a conviction in the public mind that Madame Jean really did know everything, and accordingly Madame Jean was paid court to instantly, as those are who have suddenly been invested with some unusual distinction or power. Besides, Monsieur le Maire was observed to go three times in the course of that eventful day to la Maison Prévost, and at his last visit, which was late in the day, he was accompanied by the brigadier.

But the public mind of D—— had had time, even in the space of a few hours, to become divided upon the question of Prosper Morel's insanity. That Prosper had had to do with the murder of Martin Prévost could no longer be a matter of doubt; but that ho

was the actual murderer, and, above all, that he was the only one who had committed the crime,—this became quickly the cause of the liveliest disputes. Indeed, this it was which made up the quarrel between the rich grocer's widow and Madame Joséphine le Vaillant, who both happened to be of the same opinion. These ladies opined that some person or persons yet undiscovered had really done the deed, and had, for some reason which would later be found out, been obliged to make an accomplice of old Prosper, whose weak intellect had been fairly upset by the horrible drama in which he had been mixed up. The doctor at D—— was of their way of thinking also, for after having spent an hour with the Breton on the day of his committal to gaol, he confided to the Juge de Paix that, according to his belief, the old man was not altogether of sound mind. “There is an evident mixture of fact and imagination in all he says,” had been the doctor’s remark. “Up to a certain point he is as clear and precise as possible, and unmistakably sane; but past that point, he as unmistakably wanders, and either he is ignorant or he won’t tell what he knows. I incline to believe him ignorant.”

However, Dr. Javal had been telegraphed to from Chôlet, and it remained to be

seen what that irreverential young practitioner's opinion would be. Meanwhile, an immense deal had already come out, and the craving public mind had devoured one or two hard facts,—facts not to be controverted.

For instance, in the box dug up under Prosper's own directions were found a pair of new shoes, of a small size for a man, but answering to the impression left upon the minds of all who had assisted at the original "instruction" in October, by the foot-marks traced in the garden. Of course, in so grave a matter a mere impression left upon men's memories was scarcely a thing to rest an inference upon. Still, there were the shoes, too small for any one connected with the Prévost household; and they bore marks of having probably been worn but once. The heels were scarcely soiled, whilst the fore part of the sole was still clogged with a crust of dry mud out of which a few blades of dry grass were extracted.

Now, as to the money! There was found, in five small parcels,—two only in rouleaux,—the sum of 5,000 francs in gold; corresponding to what Monsieur Richard had found noted down on a paper in his uncle's strong box. In a small leathern pocket-book, or portfolio, were also found a number of bank-notes wrapped up in a piece of

paper. But on this paper were written the following figures :—

“ 20 100 fc. notes.
12 500 do.
2 1000 do.
Total, 10,000 fcs.”

Now, when the notes were counted up they made a total of only 8,000, instead of 10,000. The two of 1,000 francs each were missing.

It became therefore evident that whoever the criminals really were, they had robbed their victim to a certain extent, though undoubtedly an insignificant one, considering the far larger sum they had had at their disposal, and had left untouched. Having taken this much, why had they taken no more? If dishonest at all, why so moderate?

When the fact, however, of the missing notes was brought home to Prosper, the old man's demeanour changed altogether. Instead of the strange half-dreamy, half-eccstatic manner he had assumed from the first, he grew vehement, and all but furious. At the bare suspicion that he had robbed the murdered man, his indignation burst violently forth, and he stalked up and down the room where he had been brought for the first preliminary examination, alternately uttering incoherent phrases of bitter anger, or relapsing into a dogged silence, during

which he contented himself with glowering at the mayor, and gnashing his teeth.

"One thing is easy to see," whispered the brigadier, who was present,—apparently for the protection of Monsieur le Maire,—"and that is, that if he were enraged, there's nothing he would stop at."

But the Breton was unmanageable, and sullenly retreating into a corner, declared he would not open his mouth again till the Curé, who had been sent for at his desire, should have arrived. When the Curé did come, the old man rose, shoved aside the gendarme with one sweep of his long lean arm, and, walking straight up to the priest, went down on both knees before him, and said, in a tone at once earnest and submissive :

"I have confessed, father! I have confessed! I have lightened my soul of its load; I have done what you ordered me to do; but tell me I can save my soul; tell me the punishment will not be eternal; tell me I shall be forgiven; tell me that, mon père; tell me that!"

"My poor friend!" said the Curé, with the utmost compassion in his tone, and laying his hand upon the bûcheron's head; "so surely as you confess your transgressions, and repent of them with all your heart, so surely will you be forgiven.

God's mercy is infinite; but you must confess all your sins;—you must withhold nothing."

"I have told all!" exclaimed the Breton, suddenly springing to his feet, and with a glance of rekindling indignation; "but am I not to tell the crimes of others, too? Are others to go unpunished?"

The manner of the man while saying this was so singular, there was such a revengeful air about him, that, coupled with the very unsafe condition of his intellect, the Curé thought he foresaw a danger, and determined to guard against it as best he could. "Prosper Morel," said he sternly, "the confession of your misdeeds is what will save your soul. The misdeeds of others lie between God and them. Beware of the spirit of revenge, my son! it will stand between you and atonement even to the Day of Judgment. You will expiate nothing by confessing other people's sins. You must repent of your own."

The brigadier fairly shrugged his shoulders with impatience on hearing this, and clanked his big sabre on the ground; and the Maire came up to the Curé cautiously, and putting his mouth close to the latter's ear, he whispered, "But if we could get him to reveal; if we could get him to put us on the trace of——"

The priest, who was a powerful man, literally whisked the Maire, who was a small, pudgy one, into the embrasure of the window ; and, standing with his back turned to Prosper, so that the arrested man should not overhear him, he said, quite lowly, “The man is not safe ; once set him on revealing, and God only knows what he will imagine ! He is as likely as not to ‘ reveal ’ you as his accomplice.”—The Maire started back with horror.—“Yes ! every bit as likely as not. The man is not altogether sane, though he will probably tell the entire truth about himself ; but don’t trust him with the lives and reputations of others. There is no saying to whom he owes a grudge, or what mischief might be done. Keep him to what touches himself only.”

The civil functionary obeyed, though reluctantly, for he did not relish being baulked of a revelation or two.

“Now, Prosper,” recommenced the Curé, “tell the truth about these missing notes. Calm yourself ; subdue your anger ; and now tell us how comes it that these two 1000-franc notes are gone ?”

“I will only speak if my words are credited,” rejoined the Breton, sullenly.

“Speak to me, Prosper, and I will believe you,” continued the Curé.

"Well, then, mon père, by my hopes of salvation, I know nothing of the money in the box. I saw it put in,—the gold and the leather portfolio,—but as it was when put in, so it has remained ever since."

"But," objected the Curé, "you see these notes were wrapped up in a sheet of paper that was sealed, and the seal has been broken. You see these figures, written on the paper; they mark the sum of 10,000 francs, and specify two 1000-franc notes. These are gone."

"Monsieur le Curé," answered Prosper, "if my own soul had not been sleepless within me and tortured me, needed I to proclaim my guilt? Was not my innocence accredited? Have I not come freely, joyfully, into the enemy's toils? Have I not come here to pay for the salvation of my immortal soul with my mortal body? This hand,—this hand"—and he held his hand aloft—"committed a murder; but of any theft I know nothing. That box has never been touched since I carried it away after the murder, till this morning when I showed it to Monsieur le Maire."

The Curé looked steadfastly at the prisoner, who never quailed before his gaze.

"Mon père," at last added Prosper, "you must believe what I say, for you

believe in what the Gospel teaches; you know that we have souls, and that we can save them;—they don't!” and he waved his arm over all the other spectators of the scene. “They believe not. Mon père, tell them I speak the truth, for I am trying hard to save my soul.”

The Curé turned to the Maire, and with great gravity said, “I do believe the man speaks the truth.”

“But, then, the notes?” retorted the irritated Maire; “and the broken seal?”

“Time and the progress of the ‘instruction’ will throw light upon the whole,” rejoined the Curé; “but I must believe Prosper Morel’s words, and I do so.”

At all events, nothing more was to be made of the Breton; and before the day closed a new and quite unforeseen direction was given to the current of the public thought in D—. Raoul de Morville was arrested for having been implicated in the murder of Martin Prévost, just as he was stepping into the diligence which was to convey him to the railway station, where he was to take the night train to Paris.

CHAPTER XXI.

VEVETTE'S SORROW.

OF the sensation called forth by this last event it is scarcely necessary to speak. Nothing so extraordinary had ever happened in D——, not only “within the memory of man,” but even,—as Monsieur le Maire proclaimed,—“in the annals of history.” A young man of good birth,—a handsome, clever, gay, hunting-and-shooting gentilhomme,—was accused of the murder of a snuffy old bourgeois, of a hard-fisted old usurer, who was as much disliked as he who was accused of murdering him was popular! True, the strange alteration in Raoul’s manner, so generally commented upon, was immediately referred to; but, as compared with the enormity of the crime, all this sank into nothing; and the past of the fine, generous young fellow, who, without having had a “chance” in life, had “got on” all by himself, mastered a good, sound educa-

tion, and never deserved an enemy, rose up now in the minds of his townsmen, and protested against the awful accusation under which he laboured.

From the moment when young Morville was arrested less was known of what took place than had been hitherto the case, and the public mind seemed in a fair way to be tortured by the efforts made to preserve secrecy. This much was known, that, between the hour of his arrest and midnight, two telegrams had been exchanged between ~~D~~— and the chief town of the department, which was rather more than eight English miles distant; and D—, as we know, not having a telegraph station, on each occasion a man on horseback had to be sent off,—which produced a great impression.

The day following Raoul's arrest more telegraphic messages were despatched to and fro, and it was even rumoured that Monsieur le Sous-Préfet might be expected in the course of the day.

Do what the authorities would,—and they did do their utmost,—some few scraps of information did ooze out; and it remained an averred fact that the brigadier had stayed more than an hour in La Maison Prévost! Nay, that he had actually breakfasted with Madame Jean

in her kitchen,—it was her second breakfast,—and that she had brought from the cellar, and devoted to the especial usage of Monsieur Frédéri, a bottle of some old Burgundy by which her defunct master set extraordinary store. How did this get known? Well, there are assuredly genii who preside over the longings of human curiosity; and in this case the particular genius was supposed to be Nicholas, the “out-door man,” who had seen the wine brought up from the cellar, and not got one drop of it to drink. ➔

Disjointed, garbled evidences, therefore, did, as I have said, leak out, and the public ended by obtaining some few scraps wherewith to still its hunger; for Madame Jean, though a very inaccessible woman, was mortal, after all, and could not wholly withstand the amount of flattery with which she was assailed that day. Why, she received in her kitchen the visit conjointly of those two leading persons, Madame Valentin and Madame Joséphine le Vaillant, who, in chorus, styled her their dear Madame Jean, and promised her, the one, some liqueur des îles, sweet enough to ruin all her teeth, the other, some very curious snuff, against neither of which seductions was that stern female proof.

By the time, then, that noon had been rung out from the church steeple of D——, several small facts had crept forth, been eagerly pounced upon, and, naturally enough, distorted. It seemed clearly ascertained that with the robbery Raoul would be proved to have nothing to do; and that, of course, obtained credence at once. But, on the other hand, a frightful proof of his guilt was whispered about. It was stated that the shoes found in the wooden box with the money, and so much too small for any of the feet on which they had till now been tried, fitted young De Morville perfectly! It was asserted that, with the exception of trying on the shoes,—which was an invention of the Maire's,—Raoul had, as yet, not been subjected to any investigation; that he was kept very privately, and was not to be examined till precise instructions came from the chef-lieu.

Touching the woodcutter, somewhat more was known, and he was reported to have made some very strange depositions. He was said to have declared that the whole night preceding the murder had been spent by him inside old Prévost's house!—a fact which, as Madame Jean remarked, “would have made your blood run cold, if it was not such a palpable impossibility.” And here, again,

opinion was obliged to incline towards the conviction of Prosper's partial insanity. Then, again, when simply questioned as to what was his acquaintance with Raoul de Morville, he merely stared, hastily said he was the best shot in the country, and refused any further answer. In reality the Breton appeared with each passing hour, to be narrowing his attention more and more to one single point, namely, to his own personal guilt, and to the certainty of achieving forgiveness by expiation. He was more mystical than ever, and had passed the night in praying, singing the "De Profundis," and covering the walls of his cell with his favourite writings and images, produced by means of a bit of charcoal, which the gaoler saw no harm in letting him have. All his ideas ran the same way. "Expiation!" was the word for ever on his lips, and he paced up and down his prison, or squatted on the floor, a crucifix in his hands, and muttering: "The sacrifice of blood!" or, "The price! the price! O Lord! the full price!" or, "As I sinned, so I pay!" When not thus occupied, he was stubbornly silent and sullen, refusing to exchange a syllable with the gardien whom it had been deemed advisable to place with him in his cell.

"Why am I to be tormented?" he had

once said. “I have owned my crime; they know it up there. What more is required? Why not give me my chance quickly? I have purchased my salvation; why do they shut the gates through which I am to go to it?” This very fixity of ideas on the part of the bûcheron threatened to make the case a vastly complicated one.

“It will be extremely hard for justice to see the way out,” observed the doctor, “for the longer the whole lasts, the more rooted become the convictions,—or delusions,—of that wretched old man, and the more difficult it will be to discover what is fact and what hallucination. He gets madder with every half-hour of solitude, and we shall end by, in reality, possessing only two positive certainties,—one, that Martin Prévost was murdered, and the other, that Morel had something to do with it. But what then? I doubt our ever getting very far beyond that.”

Somewhat later in the day Monsieur le Curé’s Lise made her appearance in her master’s study, and announced to him that la demoiselle Vévette wished to speak to him. The Curé was walking backwards and forwards in evident perturbation of spirit when this took place, and he at first looked rather vacantly at Lise, who repeated her message. Before he had found time to

express his readiness to receive her, Vévette was standing at the room-door, and one moment after they were together alone.

The girl came forward with both her hands stretched out, which the Curé took in both his, and then he looked at her. She was making strong efforts to speak, and her lips quivered and twitched, and she gasped, whilst the contraction in her throat prevented all distinct utterance. "My child!" said the priest, tenderly. Again she tried to speak, but in vain; and clutching his fingers in a tighter grasp, she sank upon her knees; and, resting her head upon the Curé's hands, burst into a fit of violent, irrepressible sobbing.

He raised her up, placed her in a chair, laid his hand gently and reverently upon her head, and seating himself near her, left her to compose herself, without attempting to comfort her by useless phrases.

When the first paroxysm of grief was a little abated he spoke to her. "You have done well, my poor little one, to come to me at once," he said; "for if consolation, and hope, are to be had anywhere, it is here. You know that there is no limit to my devotion to you; you know that I promised your mother on her death-bed, that I would always watch over you."

Vévette pressed her handkerchief to her

eyes; and, after a last struggle, looked up, and, though still with difficulty, she spoke: “Father,” said she, and though the voice shook, the expression of the face was strangely resolute, “whatever comes, I will be Raoul’s wife. Help us, or I shall die!” and she clung to the sleeve of his soutane.

“I will help you,” replied the priest impressively, but without manifesting the slightest surprise; “but, my dearest child, will you help me to help you both? Will you do your best? Will you, for his sake, be calm,—that is, try to be so,—and will you really follow the instructions I may give you?”

“I will,” answered Vévette, never taking her eyes off his face, or her fingers off his sleeve.

“Well, then; let us try to put some order in our thoughts and in our proceedings. Tell me, does any one in your own family guess at what you have just told me?”

“No one.”

“I confess,” continued the priest, “I have never had the remotest suspicion of all this; though, perhaps, to a man of the world, it might have appeared inevitable. How long have you been engaged to Raoul?”

"I don't know, mon père," answered she simply, "but I think always. You know we were children together, till Félicie and I went to the Visitation; and when we came back home, it was always the same; and I never could marry any one but Raoul."

The Curé sat for a moment silently, with compressed lips and knitted brow.

"Of course," he then said, "you are convinced of Raoul's innocence?"

Her eyes flashed fire, and her cheeks burnt as she cried, "As convinced as I am of my own existence! As convinced as you are too!" she added triumphantly.

The Curé looked at her and leaned back in his chair. "Yes, Vévette," he rejoined, "I am morally convinced that Monsieur de Morville had no hand whatever in the murder, but that is not all. Innocence is not sufficient always, and we must guard against complications. There are some very strange facts in this case, and the more we believe in our friend's guiltlessness, the better we must be prepared to meet them. One thing would be, in any other case, immensely in his favour, and that is, that Prosper Morel denies his complicity altogether."

"Well, then," exclaimed Vévette joyfully, "what more can be required?"

"A great deal more, I fear, for you see

Prosper is himself a most unsafe witness. It is a very delicate matter to deal with a man who is more than half mad ; facts have to be weighed."

"But no fact can possibly criminate Raoul," cried Vévette impatiently.

"In your mind and mine, no ! But we are not magistrates, and I fear that Richard Prévost has been forced to make a deposition that implicates——"

"Richard Prévost !" interrupted she indignantly, and springing to her feet, "Richard Prévost ! that wretched, vile, cowardly creature ! Oh ! how I always hated and despised him ! What has he dared to say ? "

"Vévette !" said the Curé, rising also, and confronting the girl, whose usually gentle aspect was literally transfigured with rage and contempt, "Vévette, calm yourself and attend to me. I was never a particular friend of Richard Prévost's. His nature has nothing in it sympathetic for me. I have always regarded him as a selfish, weak, purse-proud man ; but I am obliged to say that in this case he has behaved well, —very well. You must believe me. Monsieur Prévost has not only behaved well ; he has behaved with delicacy and kindness, and shown the utmost repugnance to bear any testimony against any one ; but, as in

nearly all such cases, there are facts which are embarrassing, and——”

“Oh ! forgive me, mon père ! forgive me !” entreated Vévette, the tears streaming afresh down her checks. “I will speak ill of no one, I promise you ; but it is so hard to bear ;—and all the harder that I know my own sin in loving Raoul as I do ; loving him better than everything !” and she wrung her hands in despair.

“What is this ?” asked the Curé, seizing her hands in his, and not sorry to divert her thoughts into a new channel ; “what is this nonsense, Vévette ? You mean to be Raoul’s wife, do you not, if it pleases God to bring him safe out of all these troubles ? And as I know you, I know beyond all doubt that you will at all times be worthy to be his wife,—be pure and spotless as snow.” He looked hard at her, and spoke slowly.

And she, with a deep blush, whispered “Yes, I will.”

“Well, then,” he resumed, with what was almost an accent of irritation, “what is all this absurdity,—all this exaggeration ? We have trials and troubles enough before us ; don’t let us increase them by our own voluntary act. Let us try to act and think uprightly, honestly, and not get entangled in any of the villainously crooked ways of over-scrupulousness. Beware of that, Vé-

vette. It all comes from the false teachings of the convent. I know it well ; it's not the first time I've had to deal with it."

"Monsieur le Curé," interrupted Vévette ; "it is all too late now. I cannot repent, but I know my sin. I know I am risking my salvation in loving him as I do, but I will risk it. I will risk life and soul for him now."

"You will do no such thing," interrupted the priest, in an extremely stern tone. "You shall learn to distinguish between real right and real wrong, my poor child, or I will not help you. I will have no false morality ; above all, no false purity,—which is of all things the most impure. You shall see the truth and worship it. You shall love God and fear Him, and bear whatever He gives you to bear,—mark you, whatever it may be. But when once you are the wife of the man you have chosen, you shall love him with all your heart, wholly and entirely, and so that you shall love nothing else in the whole world half as much. And you shall do this because this is Christian law, the law of God, whatever all the Jesuits and all the nuns in all the convents in Christendom may tell you to the contrary. And now, my poor dear child, go home, try to be calm, lift your whole heart up to God, and rely upon me utterly."

Strengthened, though somewhat abashed, by the Curé's resolute ways, Vévette prepared to obey. When she had reached the door, "Mon père," inquired she, "may I not know what it is Monsieur Richard had to say? You see I am quiet now; and I will never speak ill of Monsieur Richard again."

The Curé reflected, and answered at last: "Perhaps I ought to refuse, but it would be worse if you heard what has happened from any one else. Promise me to be courageous, and to trust in Providence for help. Monsieur Richard has been obliged to produce a letter which he found after his uncle's death, in which Raoul asks old Prévost for two thousand francs, and says that if he does not obtain them within a week, life is worthless to him. The letter is dated just a week before the murder."

"Raoul never wrote it," exclaimed Vévette.

"Raoul did write it, my child," retorted the Curé, "for I have had the letter in my hands, and read it."

"Has Raoul seen it?" she asked wildly.

"Not yet, it has not been shown to him yet; they are waiting for further instructions from the chef-lieu." And then, seeing that Vévette was almost fainting from the effects of this last piece of news, "My child," he added gravely and tenderly,

"the discovery of this letter does not destroy my moral conviction in Raoul's innocence. It must not injure yours. Go, and trust in God, and at all moments rely upon my devotion."

And she went, mournfully, but determined to do her best.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE JUGE D'INSTRUCTION.

As the doctor had predicted, the complications of the case became more embarrassing with every hour, and when the “authorities” had arrived at D——,—which they did the third day after Raoul’s arrest,—and an “instruction” had for the second time been set on foot touching the murder of Martin Prévost, the proceedings were quickly involved in such intricacy of detail, that the wisest of the magistrates declared there was no means of seeing clear in the matter. This being so, and the natural tendency of all French lawyers being granted, of course the current of professional opinion set in dead against the prisoners, and more, even, against Monsieur de Morville than against Prosper.

Everything combined to make Raoul the more interesting culprit of the two; and the singularly sharp, inhuman propensities which invariably develop themselves in a

Frenchman the moment he has to do with the workings of criminal law, gave themselves full swing directly there was a probability of a condemnation in the upper ranks of society.

No one who does not live in French society,—who is not “of it,”—will ever attain to a thorough knowledge of the inordinate measure of that society’s conservatism. There is scarcely anything in the way of injustice or cruelty at which the individual in France will stop if you appeal to him in the name of “society,” and remind him of his protective duties as a member of it.

And the origin of all this ferocity,—as it is of nearly all cruelty,—is simply fear. To be governed, defended, and if needed, avenged! to be in every possible and imaginable way “taken care of,” is the eternal ideal of a Frenchman! And the most perfect lamb of a cotton night-cap maker, whose wife leads him the life of a dog, will turn into a very hyaena if you put into his hands the fate of one of his fellow-creatures suspected of crime against purse or person. There are no merciful jurors in France, as there are few,—if any,—perfectly just judges. Bring a human being before them as an “accusé,” and bench, bar, and jury are all predisposed to believe him

guilty, are all more or less desirous that he should be proved so. In the case of a juror, the one guiding sentiment is, “This might have happened to me!” In the case of the magistracy, the ardour of pursuit is inflamed to a degree incredible to those who have not seen it with their own eyes.

The innocence of a mere human being, a unit in the social sum total, is of comparatively no consequence. Think of poor, dear, unoffending, unprotected “society”—that is, you and me, and “everybody” generally,—if one of these horrible beasts of prey gets loose!

Now all this amount of cruelty and cowardice, animating every single functionary, from the Juge d’Instruction down to the Garde Champêtre, took Raoul de Morville for its butt. In the first place, he was in reality more interesting than the wood-cutter; and in the next, no intense feeling divides itself. It chooses arbitrarily, and there, where it has become fixed, it concentrates all its energy. Raoul was, therefore, the pet victim, the favourite of this dreadful race, and he or she was but ill received who ventured to hint at the possibility of his innocence in the presence of any one belonging to la robe.

The townspeople of D—— however, imperfectly informed as they now were, con-

tinued to behave in a not totally discreditable manner. There were parties for and against the accused ; and, supposing him to be proved absolutely innocent, free from all possible suspicion,—so perfectly spotless, in short, as to render his being “let loose” again manifestly without danger to themselves,—there were people in D—— who would be actually glad of his acquittal, which was saying a great deal.

The Juge d'Instruction sent down to investigate the case of the Prévost murder was a hard, opinionated man, whose zeal was, on this particular occasion, stimulated by two different causes,—one, that his colleague in the original proceedings of seven months before had evidently made a mess of the whole business ; and the other, that he himself had been twice unlucky within the last twelvemonth,—namely, had twice seen criminals, prejudged and precondemned in his own mind, escape him. He was determined this should not be the case now, and that if Raoul got out of his clutches it should not be his fault. The natural consequence of all this was, that the whole course of the instruction was directed against Monsieur de Morville, whilst the Breton was treated as of less importance. Towards Richard Prévost the behaviour of the Juge d'Instruction was almost deferential ; he reproached him

with too much leniency only, with a culpable disregard for the sacred interests of "society," in screening, as it must be admitted he had done, a man so evidently guilty! Still, the magistrate was willing to call this an "amiable weakness,"—so long as he was not himself expected to exercise it,—and Monsieur Richard being the wealthiest member of the community in D——, came to be truly a "representative man;" and "society" becoming, therefore, as it were, incarnate in him, the Juge protected him accordingly. But from first to last he went his own way, would listen to no suggestion from any one,—not even from the Curé. He disliked priests, he said!—and meant to leave this inquisition of his into the Prévost murder as a model of sagacity and penetration to all juges d'instruction to come.

Raoul was kept with unmitigated severity in solitary confinement, it having been resolved to collect the entire amount of evidence against him before subjecting him to the first interrogatory. The letter found by Richard Prévost after his uncle's death was in the hands of the Juge. He pronounced it, as far as his opinion went, "quite conclusive," but reserved it as the one proof wherewith to crush Raoul's defence, whenever he attempted to make any.

Now, what were the results of the examinations which Prosper Morel had to undergo? They were very unsatisfactory, and extremely hard to get at, for he sometimes refused doggedly to answer at all; at others, he insisted upon the presence of the Curé, which the Juge would not permit, and perpetually declared that since he had confessed his crime, that was enough, and that he ought to be allowed the full and entire benefit of expiation without delay.

One thing he persisted in from the outset, namely, that Monsieur de Morville had absolutely nothing to do with the whole, that he scarcely knew him, and had, he believed, never spoken to him in his life. From two or three small facts which came out, and which we will relate in due time, this seemingly proved too much. Consequently it increased suspicion, and made the bûcheron's denials of Raoul's complicity unavailing.

As far as Prosper's own statement went, here was what, with infinite trouble, was made out:—He had assassinated old Prévost on the morning of the 14th of October of the previous year. He had had “words” with his master some days before, and had, in fact, been turned out of his service on account of the complaints made against him

for poaching. Subsequently, his master consented to keep him on; but the bûcheron had not forgiven or forgotten the offence, and had been terrified by the notion of how insecure his means of livelihood were, exposed as he was at any moment to be turned adrift, and die of hunger on the roadside. This had driven him to commit the crime. This "and the counsels of the Tempter," he added. And when he was asked who the "tempter" was, he invariably replied, "The devil in the form of a man!"

Who this "man" was he stubbornly refused to say, and when driven too far, would sit down and oppose silence only to all questions. "Take him back to his cell and lock him up till he chooses to speak; I can wait for ever!" was the Juge's sole resource; but to this the Breton always yielded;—the notion of perpetual and solitary confinement, with no "chance of expiation," as he termed it, being full of invincible terror to his gloomy, superstitious nature.

The manner in which the crime had been committed was, according to the account extracted from the bûcheron, as follows:—The moment Madame Jean and Nicholas were both gone out, Prosper stole from his hiding-place,—where that had been he refused to say,—and crept up-stairs to his

master's room. On looking through the key-hole he perceived Monsieur Prévost, already dressed, and standing in front of his desk, which was open. He knocked at the door, and when told to come in, began by asking pardon for coming at such an early hour,—it was then about half-past six,—but he said that, being,—as his master knew,—obliged to go to Jouzy,—a village some five miles off,—to deliver some timber, he had thought it well to come and consult Monsieur touching the arrangement to be made about a certain quantity of wood to be furnished for sleepers to the railway administration. He reminded old Prévost that when at Jouzy he was not very far from the M—— station, and that, instead of losing another day, he might as well settle about the sleepers at once. He said he was persuaded his victim would immediately search for the minute of the agreement made with the railway people, and that he should then have him at his mercy. This was precisely what happened. Martin Prévost bent forwards and pulled out a drawer in his desk in which he kept papers of importance; and while he was in the act of so doing, Prosper took a deliberate aim from behind with a hammer which he had concealed under his blouse, and hit him just above the nape

of the neck. Stunned by the blow, old Prévost fell without uttering even a groan, only stretching forth his arms. The murderer avowed that, after his victim had fallen, he struck him twice or three times more. He could not tell precisely how many times, but he said he struck him to make sure he was dead.

The manner of his escape was clear enough, and,—favoured as the abominable deed had been by chance,—easy enough to understand. Wiping the hammer on the clothes of the murdered man, he concealed it again under his blouse, and crept down-stairs. He then went into the store-room opening on to the court, in the window whereof, as we may remember, a pane had been taken out. He admitted that he had himself, during the night, extracted this window-pane quite at his ease. The opening was large, sufficient to allow of the passage of a man's body. He got out that way into the court, and crossed it to the kitchen garden. There he found the pair of shoes of which we have heard; and there another act of the drama took place, which we will give in the Breton's own words.

“I took off my own shoes where the pavement of the courtyard ceased, tied them with their own laces to my leather belt, and waited.”

"For whom?" asked the Juge.

"For the devil," was the reply; "and he came quickly. He gave me the box; it was a small one that used to stand on the top of a press in Monsieur's room; it had no key; it shut with a hook only; he opened it, showed me the gold and the pocket-book; shut it again, and I put it under my arm and went away. To cross the garden so as to mislead by the foot-marks, I shoved the fore part of my feet into the shoes, and walked as well as I could,—it is a very short distance,—trying to make a very heavy indent in the earth. Outside the garden comes the field that leads down to the little stream running into the Chôlet high-road. There was not a soul anywhere within sight;—seven o'clock had not yet struck;—so I made my way across the field down to the edge of the stream."

"Still in those small shoes?" inquired the Juge.

"Still with the fore part of my feet in those shoes," was the answer.

"It's impossible," retorted the magistrate; "simply impossible!"

"Then ask me nothing more," was the bûcheron's rejoinder; and half an hour was spent in inducing him to speak. Then he resumed his story.

"On the edge of the water," he said,

"I rested, took off the shoes, opened the box,—which was just big enough to hold them,—put them into it, and walked barefoot down the stream to the road. All trace was then lost. I dropped my hammer among the stones at the bottom of the water, and if you look for it there, you will find it. I now put on my own shoes, saw that there was no one in sight, crossed the high-road quickly, plunged into the woods on the opposite side, and knew I was safe then. I made my way round, by a détour of more than an hour, to the place where I was arrested the other day, and where I have lived almost ever since. I buried the box there, and over it I raised at first a hut of branches and twigs, where I could find shelter if it rained hard; later, I built what stands there now, and I tried to construct a chapel."

"When did you do that?" was asked.

"After the Feast for the Dead."

Beyond this, nothing was to be learnt, and all the bullying of the Juge d'Instruction was of no use. The hammer was sought for in the stream, and found; and, so far, the old man's statements received material confirmation. But the Juge d'Instruction, whose mind was made up beforehand, would not accept one word about the use made of the shoes. These fitted Raoul

de Morville perfectly, and that was proof enough of his guilt,—more than sufficient, combined with his letter to the murdered man.

To do Richard Prévost justice, the fact of his having had to produce this letter seemed to cause him unutterable pain. The Curé called upon him, and, as a friend of Raoul's, spoke to him upon the fearful subject, and was touched by the grief he showed. Monsieur Richard inquired from him to what it was possible that Raoul alluded by the closing words of his letter to old Prévost, in which he mentioned a “service” rendered to his mother? The Curé said there was a very good reason for it.

“It was in the time of my predecessor,” he recounted. “I was then Vicaire of D—, and already intimate at the Château, and at La Morvillière. Madame de Morville and Madame de Vérancour were bosom friends, and I was the intermediary of the charities their limited means allowed them to dispense. Madame de Morville was just eighteen, and a wife of not a year’s standing. Old Madame Prévost, your uncle’s mother, was an old woman, who died a couple of years later. I would fain not speak ill of my neighbour, but I believe your uncle’s father to have been

about as completely wanting in all good qualities as ever man was. He ill-treated his wretched wife, who was older than himself, and above all, he insisted on her openly professing the impious doctrines he himself professed. The unhappy woman,—who had no particular convictions of any kind, and no great stock of goodness either,—had one tender point. Your uncle Martin was then a young man. He fell ill of typhus fever, and was at death's door. La Mère Prévost, as she was called, was in such despair, that she came in secret to my superior, the then Curé of D——, and implored his help. He did what he thought right;—I don't think it was so;—he told her to repent, to do penance, to return to her religious duties, and to give whatever she could in charity. She brought him five hundred francs the next day! But now comes the pith of the story. Where did she get them? It was supposed she had stolen them from her husband! One thing is certain, that at the end of the month she was in great danger of being turned out of doors or beaten to death. His avarice was beyond description. Madame de Morville saved her. She gave her all she had, which was three hundred francs, and borrowed two from Madame de Vérancour, which she repaid little by little.

What they feared was, that our Curé should get into trouble, which he would have done had your uncle's father found out what had happened. But any how, Madame de Morville saved your great aunt ; and she never forgot it ; for in her last illness,—she became devout after Prévost died,—I myself heard her tell her son never to forget what she owed to Madame de Morville."

"And Monsieur Raoul knew of this ?" asked Richard Prévost.

"I think Madame de Vérancour told it him when he was a boy ; but I am not quite certain."

With Monsieur de Morville the case stood ill, and in the mind of the Juge d'Instruction his guilt was evident. Prosper Morel said he did not believe they had ever spoken together. This was at once disproved by the church beadle, who, on the day of All Souls, saw Raoul return into church after every one had left, and remain "in close conversation,"—so he stated,—with Prosper Morel "for full ten minutes,"—the Juge wanted him to say a quarter of an hour, but he wouldn't. This was directly after the Curé's famous sermon.

Then the Vérancour family, and Monsieur Richard, and Monsieur le Curé had all recognised Raoul late one night on the road, coming out of the path leading up to Pros-

per's abode ! Where could he be coming from, if not from visiting his accomplice ?

And the fatal shoes, too, that fitted him so well !

All went against Raoul ; and when the Juge thought he had already morally convicted him, he resolved to crush him past all possible resistance, with his own terrible letter. " And now, pray, what do you say to that ? " he exclaimed, triumphantly, after reading the document. " Do you deny having written it ? "

" Certainly not ! " replied Raoul proudly, " for it affords one clear proof of my innocence. I did write it, and Monsieur Prévost answered it, and answered it by sending me the two thousand francs ! "

At this, the exasperation of the magistrate knew no bounds ; he positively insulted the prisoner ; but Raoul flatly refused to answer one other question until he had been allowed to write to his uncle the admiral in Paris, to send him Martin Prévost's letter. He wrote, sent the key of the secrétaire in which the letter was kept, and then told the Juge d'Instruction he would not submit to any further inquiry till the answer came. It would be forty-eight hours' delay, still there was no preventing it ; but what puzzled and annoyed the Juge more than the delay was that, if

Martin Prévost really had of his own free will lent Raoul the two thousand francs, half of the case for the prosecution was destroyed.

And “*la vindicte publique !*” where would that be ?

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TRIAL.

Not only the letter came, but the Admiral himself brought it, and at this point nothing could be clearer than the defence. Martin Prévost's letter to Raoul was dated the 13th of October, the day before his death, and ran thus:—

“MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,

“I have well considered your request, and I have decided to grant it. Here are the two thousand francs for which you seem to have such pressing need. You most likely exaggerate the use they will be to you; if not, I shall be glad to have helped you, and if they do serve you, and you repay me, you will have taught me that a kindness is not always thrown away. Hitherto I have found that it did no good whatever, either to the doer or the receiver.

“Yours truly,

“MARTIN PRÉVOST.”

The Juge d'Instruction was so vexed that he tried several means of neutralising the effect of this document;—suggested that it might be forged! but its authenticity was immediately proved. Then he flatly declared that it did not diminish the probability of the prisoner's guilt, for that he might, having received these two thousand francs, have murdered old Prévost in order to obtain more.

Raoul had been forced to avow a part of the real truth, and to admit that this sum of two thousand francs was given to M. Léon Duprez that he might speculate with it. This was tortured into a heavy charge against him, and he was denounced as one of those adventurers of our age, who will do anything to get money!

Raoul now confessed that when the sum confided to Leon Duprez was lost, his position became—to himself—intolerable, for he was no longer indebted to a man who, remembering the service rendered to his own mother by Madame de Morville, requited it voluntarily by a service to the latter's son; he stood indebted to Monsieur Richard Prévost, a man he scarcely knew, and had no particular reason to like, and he could not even reveal the circumstance of the debt owing to the uncle. “I had but one thing for ever before my eyes,” said Raoul;

"the necessity for saving every sou of my salary, in order one day to be able to relate the facts to Monsieur Richard while returning him his money." In order to do this he had deprived himself of the very necessities of life, and this was his simple reason for taking at night a fourteen miles' walk across the country instead of paying the three francs to the diligence from the station.

Not only did the magistrate refuse to admit this explanation, but it was evident that the avowals of pecuniary embarrassment to which,—however humiliating they were,—Raoul was obliged to have recourse, prejudiced his examiners still more against him. He was, by his own showing, extremely poor, therefore, argued the French judicial mind, capable of anything! It would take a vast deal now to make out his innocence. The Admiral,—who discovered his nephew's real position in all its details for the first time,—behaved admirably, and assured Richard Prévost that the money owing to his uncle should be refunded in a week, the time to write to Paris and go through the formalities of getting the sum cashed through the Post Office. This did something, but still other circumstances were not got rid of; and one fresh circumstance had occurred which looked very ugly indeed for Monsieur de Morville.

It was proved by two or three witnesses that the letter R was written over and over by the Breton between, or by the side of, the P's and M's. They were great big capital letters. They were existent on the 25th of April,—the day of the St. Marc,—and they were non-existent on the morning of the 27th, when the Maire went up to La Chapelle à Prosper. Now, a dozen persons remembered Raoul's presence at the fête of the 25th, and his being one of the group to whom the son of the Juge de Paix told the story of the "large capital R's," after which the Maire had said he would go up and "see the whole with his own eyes."

But worse again than this, a farm labourer who was coming across from Jouzy in the middle of the night of the 26th, and who took the short cut by the path leading near Prosper's shed, was surprised by seeing some one rubbing very hard at the board where the Breton's "images" were known to be drawn. He thought it was the bûcheron himself, and went nearer, but it was not him, it was a bourgeois, and he wore a straw hat.

"Was it like the one the prisoner usually wore?" asked the Juge.

"Well;—" the witness couldn't say, "but he rather thought it was!" It was bright moonlight, but he only saw the man's back. Witness was in a great hurry, for he

was going to see his wife who was in service at D——, and who was ill, and he had to be back again at Jouzy by seven or eight o'clock in the morning. This again told sadly against Raoul. Evidently the letters meant Prosper and Morel, and Raoul and Morville ; the thing was as clear as day, and all further interrogatories now were time wasted ; so at least the Juge opined ; and he made out the committal of both prisoners, who were despatched to the central gaol of the department, situate in the chef-lieu.

Six weeks passed by, and towards the middle of June the case was to come on. The chef-lieu du département was a small town, and could scarcely house all the people who flocked to it to be present at the trial. Besides that, a large number of the principal inhabitants of D—— were forced to attend as witnesses. The Vérancour family, the Curé, Richard Prévost, the doctor, the Maire, in short most of the notables of D—— had to take up their quarters for a few days, at all events, at the assize town.

The acte d'accusation was made out with an unmistakable animus against Raoul, whilst the Breton was treated as a wretched, weak-witted, superstitious tool in the younger man's hands ; and after the trial had lasted three days the impression touching Monsieur

de Morville's culpability had not been removed. Monsieur le Curé's persuasion of his innocence had never varied from the moment the letter from old Prévost was found sending him the two thousand francs. He scouted all idea of his not being loudly pronounced guiltless, and obliged poor Vévette to share his belief, and to preserve strength enough to hide her own secret from her father and sister.

It was a lovely June evening, and Félicie and Vévette were sitting at the open window of their little salon in the hotel of the "Armes de Bretagne," when the doctor came in. "Well," cried Vévette, eagerly, "to day's 'audience' seems to have been very favourable! Papa's testimony, he thinks, produced a real effect. What a shame it is to keep on torturing a man in such a way when they know he is innocent, and that he must be acquitted!"

"Doctor," said Félicie, more calmly, "you look uneasy; has anything fresh occurred? The trial lasted long to-day."

"Yes," rejoined the doctor, "something has happened that is unpleasant. The testimony of the man, Colin Mercier, who saw some one rubbing at the black board behind Prosper's chapel, but did not see who it was, might be got over, for Monsieur Raoul had probability on his side when he said that it

would have been a most extraordinary fact that he should be up in the woods at one o'clock in the morning instead of being quietly at home in his bed ; but——”

“ So then it was at one o'clock in the morning that the man was seen rubbing out those great big R's ? ” interrupted Vévette, with an accent of contempt.

“ Yes,” replied the doctor, “ but that is not all. Raoul's argument was destroyed. For unhappily at eleven o'clock on that very same night Raoul was met by Daniel Leroux, the farrier, coming down the lane from the church at D——, and after exchanging a bon soir with him, Daniel saw him walk on towards the high road and cross it.”

“ Mon Dieu ! ” cried Félicie, with a vivacity unusual in her, “ Mon Dieu ! this is dreadful.”

“ It is very perplexing,” added the doctor thoughtfully, “ for this time, you see, he was recognised.”

“ What did Raoul say to that ? ” asked Félicie, with anxiety.

“ He turned white as a sheet, I am sorry to say, and absolutely refused to answer any other question.”

“ The case stands thus, then,” observed Vévette, who had neither stirred nor spoken ; “ at one o'clock on the night of the 26th to the 27th, Raoul is now supposed to have

been seen erasing those initial letters which point at him, and at eleven on that night he was positively spoken to on the road. "That is a strong case against him," she added slowly, and with a curious intensity of look and tone.

"It is so," replied the doctor.

Vévette seemed absorbed in her reflections. "As he is not guilty," she said after a pause, and as if speaking to herself, "there is a murderer somewhere,—but who is it?"

"Probably old Prosper alone," remarked the doctor, "and all the rest is in his imagination; but the case is a bad one for Monsieur Raoul, for, unluckily, when you come to have to do with justice, innocence and acquittal are not the same thing."

"And Raoul might be condemned?" said Vévette.

"You take it quietly!" retorted Félicie; "but it is a most horrible thing. And the question is of the life of a man we have known all our lives,—a man of our own class, too!"

"Human life is an awful thing before God, be it whose it may;" murmured Vévette, and there was a solemnity about her that must have struck her two companions had they not been too busy with their own thoughts.

Vévette sat still and silent till the doctor

rose to go, and then she rose too, and left the room. It was twilight now, and the moon was just heaving herself slowly up behind the towers of the cathedral. It was a glorious evening. The next morning was the fourth day of the trial, and at ten o'clock as usual the judges took their seats upon the bench. The court was crowded, as it had been on each day. The windows had to be opened on account of the heat, and a long ray of bright sunlight streamed in, and fell upon the crucifix at the extreme end of the long low hall, and just at the President's back.

The prisoners were brought in, and, accompanied by the gendarmes, took their places on the seats allotted for the accused. The Breton looked as he had done all along, a perfect type of illuminated stupidity, if you can conceive the two things going together. Half of the time he was on his knees, with his bony hands clasped together on his breast, or busy telling a big chaplet of wooden beads, with his wandering eyes glaring out of his gaunt head, casting mute appealing glances at the crucifix. In Raoul there was a great change ; a fearful change since the previous day ; so said those who had been present at the last audience. He was frightfully pale, and there was an air of stern despair about him that chilled those who gazed.

Just as the President was about to declare the day's sitting open, an usher of the court was observed to put a letter into his hands. The judge read it apparently with great attention, and then, as he seated himself, said : —“ In virtue of our discretionary powers we admit Mademoiselle Geneviève de Véرانcour to depose to a fact which bears upon the present important and complicated trial. Let her come forward.”

At these words Raoul started back as though he had been shot, and leant against the wooden partition which separated the dock from the public. Through the crowd there ran one of those quivering vibrations familiar to all who know the magnetic impulses of crowds, and this was followed by a deathlike stillness, as through the parting waves of the human sea two figures passed, preceded by the usher of the court. It was the silence of awe. Vévette, simply attired in a plain grey stuff gown, with a little white bonnet, and black veil, came forward, leaning upon the arm of the Curé for support.

“ Collect yourself, and do not be alarmed,” said the President kindly, as the Curé took off the veil from the sweet face of the girl, who at that moment seemed to have fainted. “ Let a chair be brought for the witness.”

But she had recovered herself already.

"I can stand," she said, in a low but audible tone, and she came one step forward, resting her left hand upon the Curé's stout right arm. "I am quite ready."

"Your name, age, and domicile?" asked the President, with an expression which was almost paternal in spite of his august and terrible functions.

"Marie Angélique Anne Geneviève de Vérancour; seventeen last March; resident at the Château de D——," was the reply, in a low but firm voice.

"You have a deposition to make which Monsieur le Curé of D—— tells us is of great importance to the case under examination; is that so?"

The girl trembled convulsively, made a hurried sign of the cross, and as though, at the last moment, losing all her courage, clasped her hands in agony, and turning to the priest, ejaculated:—"Oh, mon père!"

Raoul dropped upon both knees, buried his head upon his arms crossed upon the bar, and groaned audibly. White, as though every drop of blood had left her, stiff as though she were a corpse risen out of her coffin, Vévette now stood forward, and in a voice, the singularly penetrating tones of which will be remembered to their dying day by all who heard them, she spoke thus:

“Monsieur le President, on the night of the 26th to the 27th of April last, at one o’clock after midnight, Monsieur Raoul de Morville was with me in the pavilion of the garden belonging to my father’s house,—the pavilion, the entrance to which is through the door in the so-called ‘Rampart,’ opening into the lane leading to the church. At a little before twelve he first came into the pavilion, where I had been waiting for him from a little past ten. It was a good deal past one when he left. This I affirm upon oath.”

There ran a hushed murmur through the crowd like the whisper of the awakening wind through leafy trees. Every individual ear and eye were strained towards Mademoiselle de Vérancour, every individual breath was held. “God in heaven bless the girl!” suddenly burst from the lips of the poor Admiral, down whose bronzed cheeks the tears trickled unconsciously. “She is a hero!”

The President imposed silence on the public, and saying it was necessary to resist all emotion, proceeded with his formal interrogatory. When he asked the accused what he had to say to the statement of the last witness, Raoul raised his head, and cast an involuntary look of such passionate love at Vévette that it stirred the soul of

every man and woman there, and then, lowering his eyes to the ground, "Madeleine de Vérancour," said he, "was my dead sister's friend; we have all been brought up together as brother and sisters; she has wished to save my life; but I cannot admit the truth of her depositions."

But at this Vévette rose up, lovingly indignant. All shame was gone, and all girlish indecision. The woman was there fighting for her love, and stepping forward to the table in front of the bench, on which were laid the written accusations, she spoke again. "Monsieur le President," she said, in a clear, sweet voice that rang through the court, "I ask permission to make a detailed statement of facts. We shall see whether Monsieur de Morville will deny what I have to assert. It is true we were brought up together as brother and sister; but we grew to be more; and we had sworn to each other to be one day man and wife. Monsieur de Morville's object in life was to earn honourably what would render it possible for him to ask my father for my hand. I did not know of the hopes he had had of a quicker realisation of this wish. I knew that his uncle the Admiral had obtained for him a position in Paris. When the father of Monsieur de Morville fell

suddenly ill, and he returned to D— on leave, I saw at once that he was very unhappy, and I feared—I can't say what; for I had but one fear, lest something should separate us. We had no means of meeting save in secret, and that was extremely difficult. He was to return to Paris in a few days; I was too wretched! I could not bear it! I wrote to him and told him to come to the pavilion in the garden at ten or half-past ten at night, where I would meet him. I was sure every one would be gone to bed by that time, and that I could go out without being perceived. I was in the pavilion before half-past ten, and I waited. I heard every hour and half hour strike;—half-past nine, then ten, then half-past, then eleven, and then half-past eleven; and then at last he came, and we talked long of all our hopes and fears. It was likely to be our last meeting for we could not say how long; and we were, and we are, all in the whole world to each other! At last one o'clock struck! Everybody knows what a loud deep bell our parish church has. You can hear it miles distant. When I heard that, I was frightened, and told him it was time for him to go. We spoke a few more last words and then we parted, and when I ascended the terrace steps and went through the dining-

room window, the half-hour after one was striking. Ask Monsieur de Morville if he can deny that!" she added, a smile of absolute triumph curling her fevered lips. "Ask him for the few lines I wrote to him. He will have certainly kept them!"

"Accused, what have you to say?" repeated the President.

But Raoul was powerless; crushed by both despair and joy. To have the intensity of poor Vévette's love for him thus proved, and at the same time to feel that were she his wife the next day it would not, in public esteem, restore the bloom to her honour; this was too much, and coming after so much misery it utterly vanquished him. He had covered his face with his hands, and was sobbing like a child. There were few in the crowd who were not weeping too, at sight of these two poor young lovers, who were trying so hard to see which should sacrifice most to the other.

At last, Monsieur de Morville stood up, and, with quivering features, said, "Monsieur le President! I appeal to you not as a judge, but as a man. I cannot answer! You feel that I have nothing to say!"

"Then I have!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Vérancour, and, turning towards the prisoner—

"Raoul!" she cried, "remember that the worst is told. On your life hangs my life, and my honour can only be retrieved by our love. Raoul, for the love of God, and for my sake, speak, and tell all the truth!"

There was a pause, during which you heard how each man held his breath, and then, with downcast eyes and singular embarrassment, Raoul confirmed all that Vévette had said.

"When did you receive the witness's letter?" was asked of him.

"About eight o'clock, at the café. I had but just time to run across the fields to La Morvillière, speak to Brigitte,—my father's old servant,—make her believe I was gone to bed, and then steal out of the house by the back way, and walk back again to D—. It takes a good hour and a quarter to go from D— to our house, and it was striking eleven when I turned into the lane that skirts the kitchen garden of the Château. I stopped to see that there was no one near, and I heard footsteps. I walked down the lane, and Daniel Leroux, the farrier, passed. He said good-night to me, and I answered his greeting. The last stroke of eleven was striking then. I immediately went on. Instead of going to the gate that opens into the garden, I went past it, walked

right by Leroux, keeping before him till I reached the high road, there I crossed, and went straight into the woods, watching to see him out of sight. He took to the right hand up the road towards his own house, and when I no longer feared to be seen, I came out from the trees, re-crossed the road, ran down the lane, opened the gate, and in the pavilion found Vé—Mademoiselle Geneviève waiting. All she has said is true," he concluded in an almost inaudible voice. At this moment Raoul's innocence was the innate conviction of every human being present; but there was still a great deal to be elucidated.

"How did you contrive to get your note given to Monsieur de Morville?" inquired the President.

"I gave it to Mère Jubine's daughter Louison," replied Vévette, blushing deeply.

"At what hour?"

"At about four."

"Did you tell her to deliver it directly?"

"Yes; at once, without any delay."

Louise Jubine, who was amongst the witnesses, and had already deposed to some minor detail, was recalled. She was a very fine-looking girl, rather over-dressed for her station.

After the preliminary questions, all of which she answered in confirmation of

Vévette's deposition, the President addressed her. "If you received that note at four, with charge to deliver it at once, why did you only give it to the accused at past eight?"

Louison hung her head, grew scarlet, twisted her cap-strings round her fingers, and said she had "rather not reply."

"But you must reply," retorted the Judge, sternly. "You are upon oath, and if you don't answer truly, I will send you to prison."

Louison trembled all over, but when the question was again put she stammered out—

"Because, before taking it to Monsieur Raoul, I gave it to Monsieur Richard Prévost." A strange murmur arose from the crowd at this announcement.

"Why did you do this?" inquired the Judge. "Tell the whole truth, girl, or beware of the consequences."

"Because," she answered, with a little less difficulty, "Monsieur Richard had told me, ever since Monsieur Raoul's return from Paris, always to tell him everything that went on between Monsieur Raoul and the Château, and particularly whatever concerned Monsieur Raoul and Mademoiselle Vévette."

"And you were so intimate with Mon-

sieur Richard that you implicitly obeyed all his commands?" added the Judge.

The girl put her handkerchief to her face, and her reply was inaudible. Monsieur Richard was now called as a witness and sworn in. He looked ghastly. He said the heat and his long-continued state of ill health made him quite faint. The President ordered a chair to be brought for the witness. When the question was put to him, WHY he had given to Louise Jubine the directions she had stated, he said he was absolutely ignorant of the whole thing, and that Louison had invented the entire story. And so saying, he attempted to make light of it, and smile, but his lips stuck to his teeth as though they were gummed, and the smile wouldn't come.

All this time the bûcheron had remained immovable, muttering his prayers, telling his beads, and gazing at the crucifix. "Prosper Morel!" said the President, "do you still persist in declaring that Raoul de Morville was not your accomplice?"

"I don't know him!" reiterated the old man, with a gesture of impatience. "I have said so all along."

"Then who was your accomplice?"

"I will not answer that," mumbled the woodcutter. "I murdered my master. Let

me go to my doom in peace. Let me go to my expiation!"

"Prosper Morel!" suddenly exclaimed the Curé, in a loud, solemn tone, and the prisoner rose to his feet mechanically, and stood stiff as a soldier at "attention."

"Prosper Morel!" he repeated, "I told you to distrust your own heart, and to beware of revenge; but the truth must out. You must speak, for your silence will cause a second murder to be committed."—The Breton shook and shrank into himself.—

"Prosper Morel! as you hope at your last hour for forgiveness from Him,"—and the priest stretched forth his arm and pointed at the figure of Christ over the tribunal,— "tell the whole truth now! The innocent must be saved. Who was it tempted you to murder Martin Prévost?"

The old man clutched his beads with a tighter grasp, and as though compelled by a power he dared not resist. "Monsieur Richard!" he said, in a hollow tone, and then took to telling his beads again, as though he were telling them for his very soul.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SENTENCE.

THE whole situation was altogether changed by the arrest and imprisonment of Richard Prévost, which ensued immediately on Prosper's confession. After the first few preliminary questions had been put to the woodcutter and to his newly-discovered accomplice, the proceedings of that day were suddenly brought to a close, and the trial was suspended for two or three days, while a fresh act of indictment was made out, which placed Monsieur Richard by the side of the other two prisoners, accused of the murder of his uncle, Martin Prévost. During this short lapse of time poor Vévette had other terrible battles to fight; but nothing daunted her now, and she fought all her enemies stoutly,—even her father and sister. As might be supposed, Mademoiselle Félicie's virtuous resentment passed all description, and she was for adopting the most stringent measures. The Vicomte

had decreed the immediate removal of his erring child to her convent at Poitiers, in spite of the protests and supplications of the Curé of D——. The Admiral proposed that a first cousin of his own, an elderly widow lady, inhabiting a country house in the environs of the chef-lieu, and proverbial for the severity of her morals and piety, should take charge of Mademoiselle de Véرانcour till her marriage with Monsieur de Morville. “She shall never marry him,” had replied the Vicomte.

When this was repeated to Vévette, she merely sat down and wrote a note to her father, of which she sent a copy to her sister also. It only contained these words:—“You have forced me into rebellion, when all I asked was humbly to implore your pardon. Marry Raoul I will. I would have married him at the foot of the scaffold. If any obstacle be put in the way of this union, and of my possibility of doing my duty and ensuring his happiness, I will proclaim the betrothal of my sister to Richard Prévost in all its details. I am driven to this. I would rather die than do it, but I will not sacrifice Raoul.” The answer to this was, that the unnatural and abandoned girl might do what she chose, and go whither she listed; that her father cast her off, and desired never again to hear her name.

Félicie's secret was saved, and the Admiral, accompanied by the Curé, placed Vévette under the care of the Baronne de Préville, who for the time being promised to be as a mother to her.

The trial was resumed three days after its suspension, and in the corner of the seat devoted to the accused was now seated Monsieur Richard, a miserable object truly ; so wizened and shrivelled that twenty years seemed to have passed over him ; and as he sat, with his head propped upon a pillow, he perpetually smelt at a bottle of eau-de-Cologne, and seemed for ever trying to persuade himself that, rich as he was, no harm could in the end come to him. His defence of himself was so utterly weak and silly, he so evidently broke down the instant he was seized in the pitiless machinery of legal investigation, that morally his guilt was plain at once, and—said the technical men—“he deprived the case of all its interest from the outset.”

Raoul's position was now a totally altered one, and his whole bearing showed it. He knew his innocence was triumphantly proved, and he could afford to feel, if not pity for the two wretched men between whom he stood, at all events awe at what was likely to be the judgment for their crime. The aspect of old Prosper had also undergone a

change. All traces of insanity had disappeared, but a terrible war was being waged by the Breton between his gratified revenge and his strong desire not to imperil his immortal soul. Every now and then a glance of tiger-like fierceness shot out from his eyes, and went scorching over his fellow-culprit, to be suddenly atoned for by convulsive mutterings of prayers.

The story told by Prosper Morel was simply this:—His master had, upon the last complaint made against him by the Maire for poaching, discharged him with such exceeding harshness, that he had vowed to be revenged. Besides, he had no earthly means of gaining his bread; and he was frightened past all reasoning by the prospect of dying of hunger in a ditch. Well; his old master gave him a respite, and consented to keep him on “for this once;” but he, Prosper, did not forgive his master, and his fright endured, for he felt he might be sent adrift at any hour. Of this state of his mind “Monsieur Richard,” as he always called him, took advantage; and only a very few days after old Prévost had agreed to give the bûcheron another trial, the young man tempted him to his fall.

The following was the mode of perpetration of the deed:—On the night of the 13th of October the bûcheron, who was lying in

wait in the kitchen garden just beyond the courtyard, was introduced by Richard Prévost into the latter's own room, while Madame Jean was giving his supper to Nicholas down in the kitchen. Nothing could be easier, and concealment was perfect. Monsieur Richard, feigning one of his feverish headaches, said good-night to his uncle,—who was, as usual, busy with accounts,—and retired to his own room, where he had concealed Prosper.

The only little circumstance that was at all out of the common way was elicited from Madame Jean in her testimony as to what had occurred on that night. Monsieur Richard, she said, invariably slept without a night-light, having on the table by his bed-side a candle and a plentiful supply of lucifer-matches. On the night of the 13th, however, he said he should like a night-lamp, for that the pain in his head was so severe that he might, perhaps, not have strength to strike a light, should he want one during the night. A lamp was accordingly placed on the chimney-piece, and prevented Richard Prévost from being in the dark, all alone with the future murderer of his uncle.

The bûcheron's description of the hours that then elapsed was that he himself had slept a good part of the time, but that, whenever he woke up, he saw Monsieur Richard in his arm-chair, sitting up reading

by the light of the little lamp. About five o'clock, he said, the atmosphere grew chilly, and Monsieur Richard shivered very much, and got up and took a bottle from a cupboard, and gave him,—Prosper Morel,—a glass of something to drink, which made him feel reckless of anything or anybody. It was neither brandy nor rum;—he knew the taste of both; it was a white liquor, very strong, but very bitter. Monsieur Richard then softly opened his door, beckoned Prosper on, and they crossed over the passage to the lumber-room, where, with the implements the Breton had in his pockets, they, without making the least noise, took out the window-pane. That done,—which was the work of a quarter of an hour,—they went back into Monsieur Richard's room, and waited till Madame Jean should have got up and gone out to mass, and Nicholas have set forth on the errand to the post-office for which Monsieur Richard knew he had had instructions overnight. A few minutes before half-past six the house was empty of every one save Martin Prévost. When they heard the house-door close on Madame Jean, Monsieur Richard unlocked his room-door, let out Prosper Morel, and, pointing with his finger to the room up-stairs, whispered these words, “Whatever ready money there is in the caisse shall be yours.”

“And then I went up-stairs and did it,”

said the old man ; “ and when all was over I stamped three times on the floor,—as we had agreed I should do ;—and Monsieur Richard came up, but he only came to the door. He would not come in. He pointed to a small deal box standing on the drawers. I brought it to him. Then he said I must empty the large open drawer of the caisse, over which ‘ Monsieur ’ had been standing when I struck him. I did so. He put, as I have already stated, all the gold and notes and pocket-books into the deal box, and gave it to me, and then, too, he showed me the shoes, and I shut ‘ Monsieur’s ’ door, and we went down-stairs, and I got away.” The bûcheron said he supposed Monsieur Richard had gone to bed directly after he had seen him,—Prosper,—safely on the other side of the courtyard.

To all this Richard Prévost opposed only the weakest system of defence, and so utterly miserable was his whole attitude, that upon the face of the eminent barrister appointed to defend him, and lured down from Paris at a moment’s notice, and at almost the cost of his own weight in gold, you might read the blankest disappointment, and something nearly akin to disgust. His sagacity, however, quickly told him that on his own client he could rest no hopes of

success ; but that on the eccentricity of the Breton's character must depend his last chance of obtaining a mitigation of his client's fate. So he endeavoured to prove the absolute madness of the wood-cutter, and built the entire system of the defence on the fact of Prosper having been the only murderer, and all the rest being simply hallucination. But this did not now suit the old man's humour : he had been brought to tell the whole story, and now that it was told, he strenuously resisted every attempt to impugn the thorough accuracy of his depositions.

"I was discharged by the Juge d'Instruction as innocent," said he. "I had nothing more to fear. I was free ! If the truth, and the fear of God's justice had not driven me to it, I needed never have been where I now am. For the first few weeks after the deed, I did not seem to mind it much,—only I did not like seeing anything that reminded me of 'Monsieur.' I lived up yonder, only coming down into D—— to church. But I took to getting sleepless at nights ; and in all my dreams, when I did sleep, I saw my old master, and he pursued me and haunted me. He said he could not get up, and I have sometimes felt him crawling about my feet, and catching hold of them, and asking me to help him to get up. . . . Well, then,

the judgment of God came, and on All Souls'-day of last year He put it into Monsieur le Curé's mouth to say the words that were to save my soul. Since then you know all. I have no more to say. I murdered my master, and now, for the love of our dear Lord Jesus, let me go to my doom ; let me expiate what I have done, and secure the salvation of my soul ! ” Beyond this he would not go, but every one felt he had told the truth, and all the rhetoric of the French bar would have been powerless to alter this conviction.

When the presiding Judge put it to the jury whether the three accused were guilty of the murder of Martin Prévost, those twelve wise citizens returned to the box after a five minutes' absence, and their foreman gave as a verdict that, as to the accused De Morville, not so much as a shade of suspicion rested upon him ; that, as to the other two, they found Richard Prévost and Prosper Morel guilty of the wilful murder of Martin Prévost, but with “extenuating circumstances ! ”

Whether these wonderful “circumstances,” inseparable, as it would now seem, from the verdict delivered upon every difficult case in France, were really attributable to the complications of the trial itself, which passed the understanding of the jury, or to

the eloquence of the defendant's counsel, was never known.—That eloquent pleader said the whole was owing to him, and he was paid in proportion.

The sentence was, of course, penal servitude for life.

When the sentence was passed, Richard Prévost had fainted, and had to be carried away apparently lifeless, and the Breton dropped his beads from his hands, and stood transfixed. When the gendarmes touched him and forced him to move, he clasped his hands as if in agony, and went his way between the two guardians of the law, muttering the “*De profundis*” over and over, with the convulsive ardour of sheer despair.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

DURING the few days that the bûcheron remained in prison previous to his removal to his permanent place of detention, he was quite inconsolable, and inaccessible even to the arguments of the Curé, who attended him constantly. His one fixed idea being that the sacrifice of blood was alone valuable, and that by his death only could he expiate his crime, Prosper regarded himself as doomed to eternal punishment through the unbelief of his judges. The notion that, from sheer impiety, the earthly umpires of his fate had refused to help him to the salvation of his soul, so filled the Breton with rage, that every now and then he gave it vent in the most fiercely gloomy denunciations against all his countrymen in general, but in particular against those of the spot where he had sinned and been sentenced. It was of no use that the Curé sought to persuade him that, by submission, he might

expiate his crime; and that the long-enduring silent horrors of penal servitude might be turned to an even better account than death. It was all of no use. Death was his chimera,—his passion,—and he despaired because he had been deprived of it.

The two last days, however, of his stay in prison he had become more calm, had quietly partaken of his prison fare; and, when told that four-and-twenty hours later he would be “translated” to his final destination, he had asked pardon of his jailor for all the trouble he had given him. When his cell was opened the next morning he was found dead. He had hung himself.

The means by which he achieved his end were not easy. Dressing himself in his upper clothing, he had taken off his shirt and twisted it into a thick rope. He had contrived to draw his bed under the kind of square loophole which served him as a window, and heaping table and chair upon the bed, had been able to reach the iron bars, round which he managed to knot his newly-invented cord. The rest was not difficult. It merely required the overthrow of the chair and table. Both were found upon the ground. The old man had accomplished his purpose, and had carried out what he believed to be the law. In his dark, superstitious mind the fact of the

punishment constituted everything, and in his craving to be redeemed by paying the price of blood, he wholly lost sight of the sin of self-murder.

As to Richard Prévost, it was impossible to execute his sentence, for he never left his bed again, and lingered two months in the gaol infirmary. He shrank from the Curé of D——, but longed for doctors, for he fancied they could make him live ; and he loved life so dearly ! It was all one that life was to be infamy. It was life !—That it was to be poverty, labour, silence, solitude,—no matter ; it was to be life !—To go on breathing, feeding, sleeping, and waiting for the next day ! Dr. Javal came from Chôlet, and examined him, and said there was no need for him to die ; and Richard caught at this, and would have kissed Dr. Javal's hands ; and the old doctor from D——, with a queer sort of expression on his face, observed, that there might be no need for him to die, but that the great difficulty was that, somehow or other, he couldn't live. “People will die sometimes,” said he, “although we think they ought to remain alive.” After passing through a species of typhus-fever, and jaundice, and then a low fever that resembled ague, Richard Prévost was obliged to hear that he had not many days to live, and that he had better wind up his accounts with the

other world. This announcement terrified him less than had been supposed, for his strength was so exhausted that the tight grip itself with which he had held life was relaxing, and he would probably let existence go without any very great struggle.

And so it was. When “the time came,” he had no longer any power left wherewith to retain what he had ceased to be able to use, or, indeed, to comprehend. He sent to St. Philbert for the Abbé le Roy, and confessed to him. The strong piety, the robust faith of the Curé of D— were too much for him; he dreaded them, and foresaw comfort in the small practices and small prayers, in the medals, beads, and images of the narrow-minded priest of St. Philbert. He wanted some one to hush-up his conscience and tell him “not to be afraid;” and this he got. The Abbé le Roy, indeed, called his end an edifying one; and, from the way in which he spoke of it, very nearly ran the risk of inspiring naughty boys with the notion that crime was a fine thing if it necessarily brought about such sweet humility in the departing criminal. Richard Prévost confessed. Yes, confessed everything! and did not seem to find any particular hardship therein.

When all was told, of course the Abbé le Roy impressed upon his penitent the

necessity of making public whatever was not of a private nature in his confession ; so that, while the name of Félicie was never guessed at by a living creature, the details of the crime Richard had instigated were fully revealed. Every word the Breton had spoken was strictly true. Richard Prévost had tempted him to murder the old man, and the murder was committed precisely as Prosper Morel had stated. The one thing alone about which Richard really did seem to care was Raoul de Morville's forgiveness, which, of course, was generously granted. He said he could not withstand what the circumstances of Raoul's letter prompted him to do ; and once that letter in the hands of the Juge d'Instruction, things took their own course, and Richard Prévost believed himself safe.

He had heard with terror of the "capital R's" drawn by Prosper amongst his other figures, and resolved to invent some means of destroying them ;—for he thought they indicated an intention on Prosper's part to accuse him. He had naturally kept watch on Raoul,—and enlisted Louison for that purpose into his service ;—for he never knew what might occur ; and when he read Vévette's note to Raoul, he,—Richard,—felt certain that there must be two or three hours in the night for the employment of

which Raoul could never account. By this he profited ; stole out of his own house by the back way, went up to the bûcheron's shed, found him asleep, effaced all trace of the fatal letters, and believed no one had seen him ; but persuaded himself that, had any one done so, it would be easy to turn suspicion towards Monsieur de Morville.

When Richard Prévost had ended his terrible confession, the Abbé le Roy began to indulge in descriptions of the various and irresistible forms which “the demon” takes in order to lead men astray ; and by sheer force of habit, he warned his penitent, as if there were any further opportunities of transgression lying before him. Above all, he was hard upon Satan, for having assumed the shape of the unwitting, and so pious, and well brought up Mademoiselle Félicie ! “It is always thus !” said he ; “it is by that most unholy, most abominable of all passions, love, that the demon plots the fall of men. If you had not been driven to madness by your unhappy uncle's refusal to allow you to aspire to the object of your choice, you would never——”

The dying man stopped him. “Pardon, mon père,” he whispered, laying his cold clammy fingers on the priest's arm, “I am

innocent there;—quite innocent; it was not for Mademoiselle Félicie; I could have done without her! but I saw that my uncle might live a long time, and that I might die before he did even; that, at best, I should probably be long past my youth when I got his money; and that seemed to me so very, very sad, so unjust, that it became unbearable; and I was tempted, as I have told you. Indeed, that is the truth, the entire truth. Not Mademoiselle Félicie! no, no! I really could have done without her!" And that was the truth, and the Abbé le Roy was glad that it was so.

And so the cause of sin was not love, but greed. Impatience! impatience to enjoy!

One person,—the only one from whom no secret could be kept,—fully confirmed Richard Prévost's statement, and that person was Madame Jean. "Seigneur Jésus!" said she, when the priest of St. Philbert talked with her over her deceased young master. "I should never have suspected Monsieur Richard of loving any one. I won't swear that he was capable of becoming a saint for money, but I would have sworn that he was incapable of committing a crime for love!" Now Madame Jean herself did, four weeks after Richard Prévost's demise, marry the brigadier de

gendarmerie, and she gave as a reason that, "you couldn't tell whom to trust!" which enigmatical sentence was interpreted by the evil-minded into meaning that Madame Jean was afraid, if she did not marry the gendarme, of being murdered by him in order that he might steal her money.

As to Mademoiselle Félicie, her situation became promptly a satisfactory one,—which was gratifying, considering what a practical, right-thinking, meritorious young person she was, with so well-regulated a mind! "All in such perfect equilibrium," said the public. She went, immediately after the trial, to stay at Tours, with the worldly-minded relative who had been in the habit of sending her and her sister Paris newspapers. There she completely enslaved a stout, good-looking, middle-aged colonel, almost as well-born as he was intellectually common-place, and possessed of fortune sufficient to render the post of mistress of his house an agreeable one. With him Félicie de Vérancour contracted a marriage which was a model for all proper and sensible marriages between well-born people. No hint of her so nearly becoming Madame de Châteaubréville, with the thousands a year of the then unsuspected criminal to spend, and for which, had the position been achieved,

the whole department would have courted her ;—no hint of this will ever, believe me, get abroad. Félicie will always, as she does now, go into that society which deems itself the best, and in it she will continue to be esteemed and honoured, being at the same time only just enough pitied, to prevent her being envied, for her close connection with that blameable young woman her sister, whom, to the end of time, Félicie will with a shudder of mourning virtue style “that unfortunate creature !”

And what of Vévette ? No opposition of any kind being offered by the Vicomte, the necessary formalities were accomplished, and Raoul and Vévette became man and wife, the ceremony being performed by the Curé of D——, and the Admiral being the chief witness. The Curé made them no discourse upon the occasion, he only blessed them from the depths of his very heart, and solemnly told them to be all in all to each other.

The Admiral immediately offered a home to Raoul and his wife, until he could find some employment for the former. They all proceeded to Paris, taking with them Monsieur de Morville the elder, whose unconscious state saved him from all the miseries which had fallen on those nearest to him. The Admiral’s means were not large, but he was respected, and had influ-

ence. He soon obtained for his nephew the post of vice-consul in one of the Spanish Republics of South America. It was an unhealthy place, where no man of any value would go, but where, if he could contrive to save life, fortune might be honestly made by a clever enterprising man. Of course Raoul accepted, and so did Vévette, and they went forth together hand in hand, serene and grave, trustful in Providence, and convinced that total unselfishness alone, and passionate devotion to another, can sweeten the solemnity of life.

In the world they left behind them, both were severely judged. After the first emotion was over, the public unanimously condemned poor Vévette, and the masculine part of the community were angrily taken to task by all their female relatives if they allowed an expression of interest or compassion for her to escape them. "What an example for Julie or Marie, or Catherine or Louise!" That was the argument used, and it never failed of its effect; and the browbeaten male, whenever it was applied to him, hung his head and felt small; and so poor Vévette came to be regarded everywhere as a black, black sheep, and in one heart only, in that of the Curé of D——, will she for ever remain a "ewe lamb."

If in ten or fifteen years Monsieur and
2 A

12

Madame de Morville,—as is very possible,—return from their tropical exile wealthy, and with the renown of excellent services attaching to Raoul's name, they will be what is termed "well received," and perform the irksome function which is described as "going everywhere," but "Society" will be on its guard against any intimate adoption of them; and the institution called in France *La Famille* will regard them as a menace, for Pater and Mater-familias will cordially unite in holding up their hands at sight of this erring couple, who, not content with loving, went and married for love.

That is the real crime; the mere love is to be got over. Here and there a broken heart—voilà tout! Not much harm therein; but to go marrying for love;—oh! no!

"What would become of us all," would cry Society in France, "if the matrimonial association were once to be established on the all-for-love principle!"

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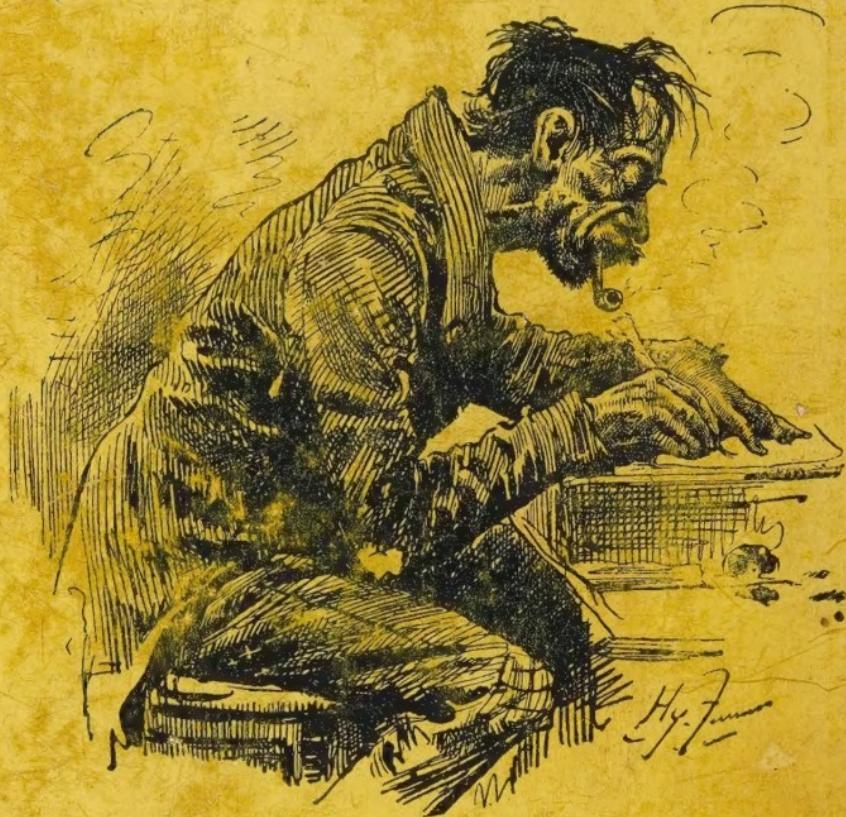
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